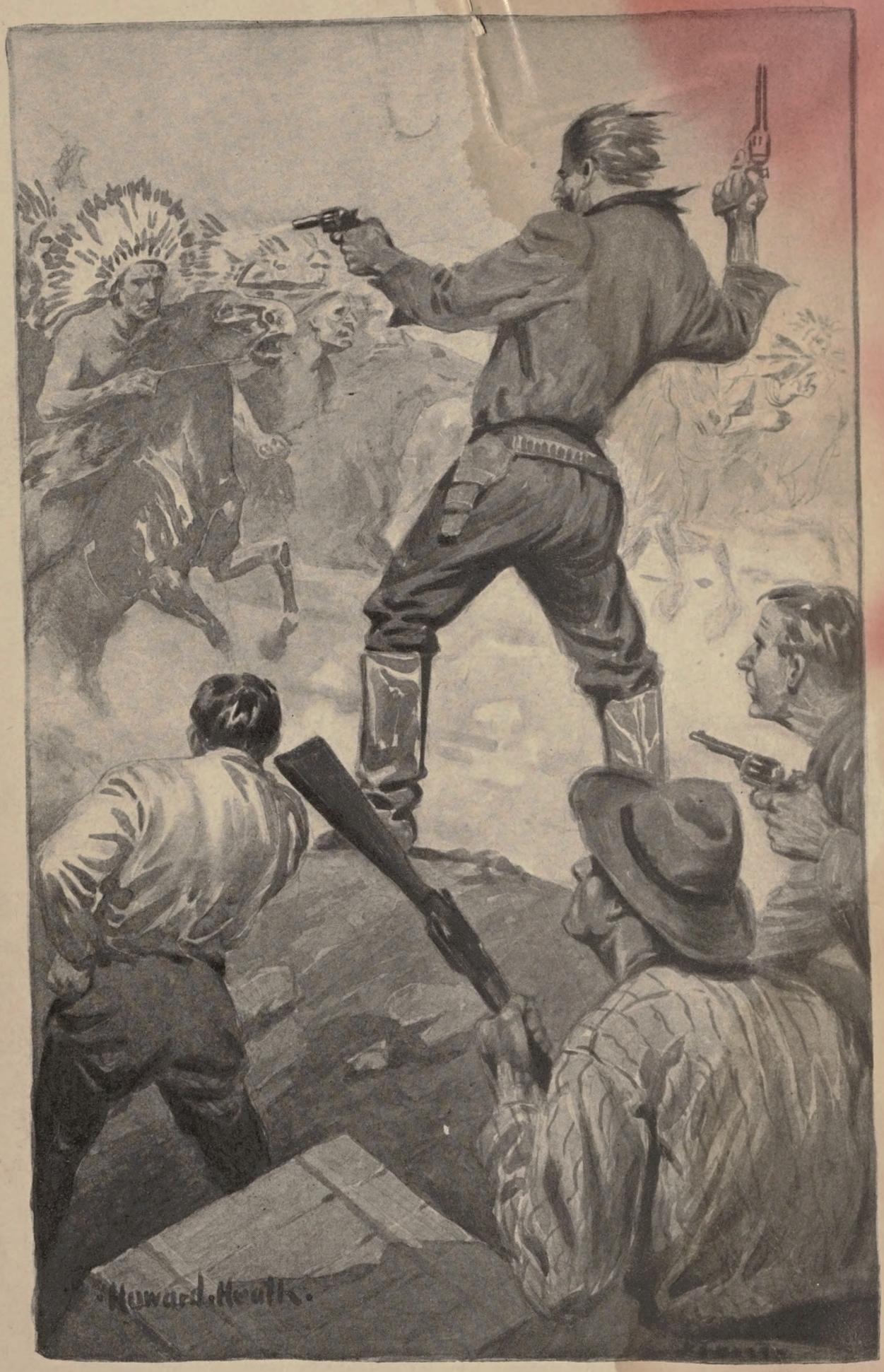


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Jud Jimpson Leaped to the Earthwork.

[Page 286]

THE BOY FORTY-NINERS

OR

ACROSS THE PLAINS AND MOUNTAINS TO THE GOLD-MINES OF CALIFORNIA IN A PRAIRIE-SCHOONER

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BY

EVERETT McNEIL

AUTHOR OF

DICKON BEND-THE-BOW, HERMIT OF THE CULEBRA MOUNTAINS,
THE LOST TREASURE CAVE, ETC.



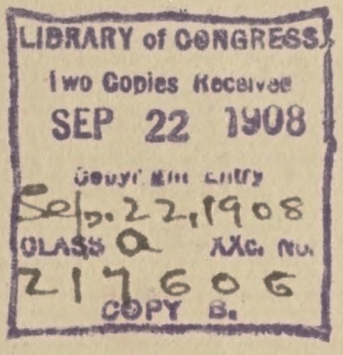
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TO

THE BOYS AND GIRLS

OF THE GREATER UNITED STATES

WHO WOULD KNOW SOMETHING OF THE KIND OF

BRAWN AND BRAIN AND COURAGE

THAT WENT INTO THE UPBUILDING OF

THE GREAT WEST

THIS STORY OF ONE OF THE MOST

IMPORTANT PHASES OF THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT

IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY

DEDICATED

FOREWORD

The long chained lines of yoked and patient steers;
The long white trains that pointed to the West,
Beyond the savage West; the hopes and fears
Of blunt, untutor'd men, who hardly guessed
Their course.

JOAQUIN MILLER

ONE clear cold day in January, 1848, a man, walking along the tail-race of a saw-mill recently built on the American River in the then wilderness of the eastern foot-hills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, caught sight of a gleam of yellow shining up through the water in the bottom of the ditch; and quickly reaching down his hand into the water, which was running about a foot deep, he picked up a little rounded piece of yellow metal, half the size and the shape of a pea. This was James W. Marshall; and the bit of yellow metal he held in his hand was the first gold discovered in California.

For two or three months afterward only vague rumours of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, as the saw-mill was known, reached the outside world. Then the rumours grew rapidly, were confirmed, and by the end of 1848 the wondrous news of the marvellously

rich gold-fields found in California had spread, like wildfire, all over the civilised world. Now began the most remarkable exodus of gold-mad men that history has recorded. They came from all parts of the world. They belonged to all ranks and professions and conditions of life. Doctors, lawyers, merchants, clergymen, professors, mechanics, farmers, labourers, adventurers, gamblers, thieves, murderers, all jostled elbows together in their wild anxiety to get to the mines as speedily as possible.

Over the United States the gold fever swept like an epidemic. From cities and villages and farms men hurried to the mines, careless or regardless of the dangers and hardships to be met, if only they could reach the Land of Golden Promises. Some went by boat around Cape Horn, others by way of the Isthmus of Panama; but the greater number chose the more direct route across the great plains and mountains and deserts of the then unknown West, travelling in covered waggons, drawn by oxen, mules, or horses, and following the trails made by the buffalo, the Indian, or the hunter, which soon became plainly outlined by the whitening bones of their dead animals and the graves of those perishing from the unexpected hardships of the long journey.

THE BOY FORTY-NINERS is intended to picture to the eyes of the younger generations something of the perils braved, the hardships endured, the difficulties

overcome, and the labours performed by these venturesome emigrants, who dared this long pilgrimage from the outposts of civilisation along the Missouri River, across "The Great American Desert," to the golden sands of California; and to show to them at what a price, in money and toil and endurance and pluck and courage, and even life itself, their fathers and mothers purchased the rich inheritance, the Greater United States, that they, their sons and daughters, are now enjoying.

The journey made by Ray and Arthur and their companions was a journey made by tens of thousands of emigrants and gold-seekers; and the perils and hardships and labours so bravely met and overcome by our young friends were as courageously met and overcome by thousands of men and women, and even children, during those eventful years of '49 and '50.

It is good for those who now reap, where the nation's greatness was sown with so much toil and blood, to know on what solid foundations of heroism and pluck that greatness was built; and for such this book has been written. That it may add to their patriotism, and help to inspire a like heroism, with which to meet and conquer their own perils and difficulties, is the sincere hope of the author.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Two Boys	3
II.	Jedidiah Judson	16
III.	Ray Picks up a Card	22
IV.	The Steamboat Race	31
V.	Mildred	43
VI.	Eagle Feather	50
VII.	The Discomfiture of Grizzly Ike	64
VIII.	"Stop, Thief, Stop!"	72
IX.	Scoot	88
X.	The Black Spots in the Darkness	102
XI.	Scoot's "Free Papahs"	110
XII.	Tom Pike	120
XIII.	An Adventure with a Bad Man	125
XIV.	The Surprise	138
XV.	Jud Jimpson's Ash-Map	154
XVI.	"This Waggon is Bound to Go Clear Through to the Sacramento"	165
XVII.	The Man Behind the Rock	179

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII.	In the Quicksands	193
XIX.	The Pawnee Horse-Thief	203
XX.	The Devil's Quartet	212
XXI.	Buffalo! Buffalo!	221
XXII.	The Sinful Four Again	237
XXIII.	The Mysterious Shot from Across the Canyon	249
XXIV.	On the Trail Beyond Fort Laramie	261
XXV.	Indians! Indians!	272
XXVI.	Red Elk	289
XXVII.	On the Backbone of the Continent	302
XXVIII.	Tom Pike's Pocket-Knife	317
XXIX.	The Battle with the Grizzly	328
XXX.	The City of the Saints	342
XXXI.	News of the Sinful Four	351
XXXII.	The Cry in the Desert	362
XXXIII.	Robbed	376
XXXIV.	Bill and Lis	394
XXXV.	The Shower of Arrows	404
XXXVI.	At the Devil's Slide	412
XXXVII.	The Land of Gold	422

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
Jud Jimpson Leaped to the Earthwork. *Frontispiece*	
"How Do, White Papoose?"	62
"Dance! Dance, You Long-legged Villain! Dance!"	134
Ray Painted the Motto on One Side of the Wagon-cover, and then Arthur Tried his Skill on the Other Side.	172
Leveled it at the Monster whose Panting Side Almost Touched the Muzzle.	232
The Bear Stood his Ground.	338
"Count it, Count it."	390
"You—You Don't Mean to Accuse Me?"	426

THE BOY FORTY-NINERS

CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO BOYS

ON a hot day, in the early part of June, 1849, two boys were hoeing corn on a farm in southern Ohio. They were sturdy lads, strong and healthful looking, with pleasant, resolute faces and clear, courageous eyes. The elder and larger of the two youths wore a much dilapidated soft felt hat, set well back on the head, a "checked" gingham shirt, out at both elbows, and a pair of blue overalls, which reached to within an inch of his ankles. The remainder of his legs and feet were bare. He had an unusually well-developed form for a boy of sixteen; wide in the shoulders, deep in the chest, narrow through the hips, and straight in limb, with head set squarely on a short, thick neck—a physique which promised to bestow on its owner, when he reached maturity, extraordinary agility and strength.

The dress of his companion was similar, with the exception of the head-covering, which was a broad-brimmed straw hat, without a band and with a ragged hole in its top. He did not have the athletic proportions of his co-worker; but was slender in build, though of robust health, with a fine intellectual face, and a particularly resolute-looking mouth and chin.

The day was sultry, with hardly a breath of air

stirring; and the two boys were tired, for it was nearing the noon hour and they had been hard at work since early sunrise. When they reached the ends of the rows of corn, both paused, and, resting themselves on their hoe handles, wiped, with their grimy sleeves, the sweat-drops off their hot faces.

"Say, Art," and the elder boy bent his eyes longingly in the direction of the farmhouse, which crowned the top of a small hill some two hundred rods to the north of where they stood, "isn't it about time that old dinner-horn was blowing? If it waits much longer, I reckon somebody will have to go hungry to-day, for I feel as if I could eat all one usually gets on old Thompson's table myself."

"Well, I should say it was!" Arthur replied, as he shoved the dirt off the blade of his hoe with his thumb, and then, drawing his hand over his forehead to wipe the sweat therefrom, left a black streak from hair to chin. "Blame that old horn anyway! I've felt as hollow as a balloon for the last hour, and I'm thinking I'll still have that hollow feeling when I've got outside of all I can get at the dinner-table to-day. Thompson don't intend that we shall eat him out of house and lands, I can tell you. Ever since I've been working for him I've been trying to get filled up; but the end of each meal still finds an aching void in the regions of my stomach," and he looked ruefully to the ground. Suddenly he raised his eyes, with a bright look of determination on his face, and continued: "Say, Ray, why must we work for old Thompson, anyway? Why can't we strike out for ourselves; and not only leave Thompson, but also leave this place, and go somewhere else? I am sure we can't be any worse off no matter where

we go. Everybody here knows that we are poorhouse boys, and they won't treat us half decent. Maybe, if we could get somewhere else, we would stand more of a show. At least I am in favour of trying it. What do you say, Ray?"

Ray's face showed that the proposition of his companion had startled him considerably. He flushed and paled and at last replied in a voice that trembled slightly, as he glanced about as if to see if anybody were within hearing distance: "Art, that is just what I've been thinking of doing for the last twenty-four hours, but I did not know how you would take it, so I hardly dared say anything to you about it. We are but little better than slaves here, with old Thompson to grind work out of us and that bully of a son of his to lord it over us," and he crushed a large lump of dirt impatiently with his bare heel.

"Well, I'm ready to go and to start at once," Arthur answered. "I've had just about all I want of this kind of work. I know it can't be good for the brain nor the health to work from four o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night. A fellow wants a little time to have fun. But here it's work from the time we get up until we go to bed, and there isn't much money in it, either— Where shall we go?"

Ray was looking toward his big toe, which he had dug deep into the loose soil. He was thinking hard; and it helps a boy to think hard, when he is barefooted, to dig his toes in the ground. Suddenly he gave the toe a violent fling out of the dirt, whirled around, and faced Arthur, his countenance flushing and his eyes sparkling. He had solved the problem.

"Let's go to California—to the gold mines!" he ex-

claimed; then he stopped abruptly and glanced around in a half-frightened way.

Arthur looked blankly in his face for a moment; and then, dropping his hoe to the ground, he seized his old straw hat, and, swinging it around his head, shouted enthusiastically: "To California! To hunt for gold! Hurrah, the very thing for us to do! And I make a move that we start this very night. What's to hinder? Neither of us has anybody, so far as he knows, who cares a continental whether he lives or dies or where he goes. Are you in earnest, Ray?"

"Sure!" responded Ray emphatically. "And I am ready to start to-night, if you are. There's a steamboat going down the Ohio to-morrow loaded with gold-seekers. I know, because I heard Thompson telling the men about it this morning; and if we get a hustle on us to-night, we can get to the river before the boat passes. It's only fifteen miles to the Ohio, and I am sure we can walk that distance in five or six hours. The steamboat will take us to St. Louis, and from there we can go by another steamer up the Missouri to Independence, where the waggon-trains start on their long journey across the plains and over the mountains to the Land of Gold. Oh, it will be great fun, and just a little more exciting than hoeing corn all day long for old Thompson, won't it, Art?"

"You bet!" Arthur replied, his eyes sparkling. "And we will see deers and antelopes and buffalos and bears and Indians, and maybe kill them, too; and when we get to California we'll find a gold mine, and come back rich enough to buy old Thompson out a dozen times over! Won't he be surprised when he calls us to-morrow morning at four o'clock and we don't

come tumbling down the ladder? Wonder what he'll think has become of us? We won't tell old Thompson anything about it, will we, Ray?"

"No sir-ree!" Ray answered decidedly. "He'd be sure to make trouble if we did. He thinks he owns us, just because he took us from the poorhouse and has kept us for the last two years, making us earn all he ever gave us twice over. He couldn't get the work done that we do for less than twenty dollars a month, and he only pays the both of us eight dollars and a half a month. Oh, he'll be mad all right when he finds we've gone, but I don't care. If he'd treated us half-way decent it would be different. No, there won't be no tears dropping out of my eyes when I say good-bye to this farm," and Ray dug his right big toe resentfully into the soft ground by way of emphasising the bitterness of his remarks.

"That's exactly the way I feel," Arthur declared. "But won't he be mad? Well, we'll give him what he owes us, to make up for our sudden going. It's not much, but a little money looks mighty big to Thompson. Let me see, he owes me about one dollar and seventy cents."

"And me two dollars and ten cents," broke in Ray. "That makes three dollars and eighty cents. Well, let him have it. We'll soon be digging up gold by the basketful, like we do potatoes here. Hurrah for California!—Hello, there goes the dinner-horn at last! Remember, mum's the word, Art."

The two boys stuck their hoes up in the ground, and hurried to the farmhouse, where, as they expected, their hunger was only half appeased when the dinner-table was emptied of all eatables. They said but little

while in the presence of the farmer or any of his family, but when alone by themselves in the corn field again that afternoon their tongues rattled away as though they would never stop; and by night they had everything planned for starting before morning.

Arthur and Ray slept in a small loft in the north end of the barn, "good enough for poorhouse kids" according to farmer Thompson; and as soon as the chores were done that night, they started for this room, where they could be alone to talk over that wonderful journey to California which they were so soon to begin.

The farmer thought they were tired, and took no special notice of their early bed-going, except to call out, as they climbed up the ladder to the loft: "That's right, boys. Get to bed early, for you must get up tomorrow morning at three o'clock. I'm going to town and I want to get an early start; so don't let me have to call you more than once, or I'll come up and throw you down."

Ray and Arthur chuckled, and Ray said: "Won't the old fellow's face look blank when he climbs up that long ladder to throw us sleepy kids down, and finds us gone? And won't he swear? 'Twould be as good as a circus to see and hear him; and we must miss it!"

"Well, I won't miss it," Arthur declared emphatically. "I've heard every cuss-word in old Thompson's dictionary, and I hope I'll never hear one of them again."

The moment the two boys were in the loft and the door shut tightly they set the lantern, the only light allowed them, down on the floor, and looked excitedly into each other's eyes.

"Now for getting ready!" exclaimed Ray.

"Let's get our money and count it the first thing, so that we'll know just how much we've got," suggested Arthur. "I think I've got fifty-nine dollars and thirty-four cents, but I'm not sure."

"And I had seventy-three dollars and eighty-two cents before I bought my last shirt, which cost sixty-five cents. This should leave me seventy-three dollars and seventeen cents," asserted Ray. "Come, we'll make sure. We'll get our hidden treasure and count the cash," and he hurried to the northeast corner of the loft. On the wall hung a short string about two feet long. Ray took this string, got down on his hands and knees, and began carefully measuring with it over the floor, beginning from the corner. "Three strings due south from northeast corner, then two and one-half strings west to black knot, thence one string south to long crack, up long crack to round knot hole, place finger in hole and pull up board," he murmured, as he made the required measurements, pulled up the board, thrust his hand down into the cavity, and pulled out a round tin can, with its cover tied firmly on with strong twine.

In the meantime Arthur had been going through much the same formalities, starting from another corner of the room and ending with the discovery of another tin can underneath another board.

The two boys always went through this ceremony before getting their treasure, not that it was at all necessary—each could have found his particular hoard with his eyes blindfolded; but it gave an air of romantic reality to their treasure-hiding very fascinating to the lads, besides, as Arthur said, "if anything should happen to us, we could tell anybody exactly how to find the treasure."

In a moment more Ray and Arthur were squatted on the floor in front of the lantern, counting the hoardings saved since leaving the poorhouse two years before.

"I've got exactly fifty-nine dollars and twenty-three cents," Arthur declared, when he had finished his count. "I knew it was fifty-nine dollars and something. How much have you got, Ray?"

"Precisely seventy-three dollars and seventeen cents," Ray responded triumphantly. "I thought I was right. Now, that makes one hundred and thirty-two dollars and forty cents in all, a lot of money, but not enough to buy our outfits and pay our way to California. We'll have to work our way whenever we can, Art. Shouldn't wonder if we could get a job on the boat going down to St. Louis," he added hopefully.

"Of course we can," Arthur asserted confidently. "Anyway we have enough money to give us a good start, and I am sure we can find lots of things to do to earn money while we are on the way. You know where there's a will there's a way—even to California; and we'll find the way, if we have to make it. Now, when had we better be getting out of here, Ray?" and Arthur glanced, a bit regretfully, about the room that had been the only home they had known for so many months.

"The sooner the better," Ray replied quickly; "for the farther we get from here before morning the better 'twill be for us. Shouldn't wonder if old Thompson tried to find us and bring us back. He can't get anybody else to do the work we've been doing for anywhere near the same money we've been getting, and he'll miss us bad. Besides, everybody's going to the gold mines, and he'll find it mighty hard to get help of any kind.

So I fancy we'd better be starting just as soon as it is safe, about an hour after the light goes out in the house, then——"

"What in thunder are you keeping that lantern burning so long for?" shouted up an angry voice from the darkness below. "Blow it out and go to bed, or I'll come up and give your hides a warming, you poorhouse rats."

Ray and Arthur jumped at the sound of the unexpected voice as if a pistol had been fired off close behind their backs, shoved the money quickly into their pockets, and blew out the lantern.

"Much obliged, Bill," Arthur called back as soon as this had been done, "but our hides don't need no warming. Save your heat for next winter. Light's out, Bill. Good-night, Bill. See you the next time we meet, Bill."

"Think you're smart, don't you?" responded the voice wrathfully. "Well, I'll make you smart in the morning."

"All right, Bill," Ray shouted back. "Make us smart in the morning. Good-night, Bill."

The boys heard the barn door slam shut and the crunch of heavy boots on the gravel outside, and knew that "Bill" Thompson, the farmer's son, had gone back to the house.

"There, I hope that's the last we ever see or hear of that bully!" exclaimed Arthur fervently. "He's treated us like dogs from the day old Thompson brought us from the poorhouse; and if I ever meet him when I'm a man grown I'll—" and Arthur doubled up his right fist and shook it under Ray's nose, an act which every boy will understand without any further explanations on my part.

"Me, too!" Ray declared with more emphasis than grammar. "But you won't catch him getting in our way when we're men. He's too big a coward. All bullies are. But forget him. We have more important things to think of now. There are our trunks to pack before we're off for the golden sands of California," and Ray laughed.

Fortunately the moon was shining brightly, and its rays, entering through a large window in the south side of the room, furnished the two boys with sufficient light to pack their "trunks" without the aid of the lantern. The "trunks" were two very large and strong red bandanna handkerchiefs; and the "packing" consisted in securely tying up in each of the "trunks" one shirt (clean), one pair of socks (clean), one pair of trousers of cheap material but nearly new, a coat and vest to match the trousers, one handkerchief (clean), one box of paper collars, and one necktie. A comb, a toothbrush, and a few other little trinkets they stowed away in their pockets. The money was securely tied in strong linen handkerchiefs and tucked away in their pockets. They had decided not to put on their good clothes until they reached the river, or it became light enough for people to see how they were dressed, and thus save them as much as possible from the dust of the road; and so they did not change their clothes, but kept on their old overalls and shirts. Each lad had a nearly new pair of boots, which he now put on his feet, to protect them in the darkness.

"Just look and see if the old man's light is out, Art," Ray asked, as he pulled on his boots. "I'm getting anxious to be off."

Arthur hurried to one of the windows. "Not a sign

of a light in the whole house," he reported; "and I think if we are careful to make no noise, it will be safe for us to go now."

Silently each lad gripped his bundle in his right hand; and then both turned involuntarily for a last look around the room that had been their home for two years. The bed was the only bought furniture in the room, and that had been cast out of the house as too old and battered for further use. A couple of soap boxes had served as chairs. The floor and walls and ceiling were of rough unplaned pine boards, full of knot holes and covered with dust and cobwebs. A few pictures cut from the illustrated papers were tacked on the walls. A more barren and inhospitable-looking room it would be hard to imagine; and yet it was dear to the hearts of these lonely boys, to whom every knot hole and dusty board was as familiar as the face of a friend; and there were tears in their eyes as they turned and cautiously opened the door and crept down the ladder.

Thompson kept all the doors of the barn strongly locked, but this did not trouble the boys. A window in the side of the barn opposite the house gave them an easy and a safe exit; and with violently throbbing hearts they opened this window, dropped to the ground outside, ran across the barnyard, jumped over the fence, and started on the run down the road, which they knew ran straight south clear to the Ohio River, which it crossed, by means of a ferry, at the spot where they expected to meet the boat bound for St. Louis.

The two boys, Ray Norman and Arthur Walton, whom we have just started on their long journey for far-off California, a journey whose perils and privations

it was well they could not foresee, were, as we have already hinted, poorhouse boys. Ray's father, a circus athlete, had been killed accidentally while the show was giving a performance in a neighbouring town; and the circus management had promptly and heartlessly turned over the boy, then but five years old, to the county poorhouse, declaring that they knew nothing whatever of the lad's parents except that the dead athlete had claimed to be his father, and that now, so far as they knew, he was without a friend or relative in the world. On the athlete's hand was found a curious ring, made by the twisting together of two gold vipers, whose raised heads met, and, holding between their jaws a blood-red ruby, formed the set of the ring. Ray wore this ring, suspended by a strong string, around his neck, and valued it greatly as a possible clew that might some day tell him something of his parentage.

Arthur, when a babe, had been left at the poorhouse one dark night, labelled Arthur Walton. No clew to the one who had left him there could be found, and he had been brought up in the poorhouse, until some two years before the opening of this story, when farmer Thompson had applied to the poorhouse for two boys, and Arthur and Ray had been turned over to his tender mercies. He was a rough, brutal man, with no more thought for the boys than he had for his horses; and Ray's and Arthur's life on the farm had been an exceedingly hard one, aggravated by the needlessly cruel bullying of the farmer's only son, already known to the reader as Bill.

Ray had but one friend, and that was Arthur; and Arthur had but one friend, and that was Ray; and, consequently, the two lads had clung together since

their early childhood, and refused to be separated. Farmer Thompson had taken both the boys, not from any kindness of heart, but because he needed their help; and now he valued their labour far too much to care to have them leave him. The boys, notwithstanding their unfortunate surroundings, were bright, manly fellows, honest and industrious, and, withal, two as plucky lads as one could find in a long day's walk.

CHAPTER TWO

JEDIDIAH JUDSON

THE morning's sun was just beginning to brighten the eastern skies when Ray and Arthur, footsore and leg weary, came within sight of the Ohio River. About forty rods from the river bank they entered a little clump of thick woods, and there exchanged their clothes, throwing away their old shirts and overalls and putting on the good clothes they had brought with them in their "trunks," even to collars and neckties. When they had completed their toilet they stood up and looked at each other to compare results.

"Your neck or your tie is on crooked," warned Arthur.

"And your legs are altogether too short for your pants," laughed Ray. "Better sit down and let me stretch them. I have heard of people having their legs pulled, and maybe it was because their pants were too long."

"Well, your legs need sawing off about a foot," Arthur rejoined. "I can almost see the tops of your boots. Better stick your pants down in your boot-tops, and then nobody'll know but what they're plenty long enough. Say but I'm tired and sleepy and hungry! Let's see if we can't get something to eat down at the

ferry. Wonder when that boat'll be along. Come on. We're looking fine enough to go to the President's reception. Shouldn't wonder if they would take us for two noblemen in disguise," and Arthur hurried away toward the half-dozen houses that clustered around the ferry and the steamboat landing, and Ray hurried after him.

The ferryman gave the two hungry boys a hearty breakfast, and told them that the boat was expected to be along about ten o'clock, if she didn't get stuck on a mud-bank or sand-bar or run into a snag or blow up; and if they wanted to get a "snack of sleep," to crawl into his bunk and he would wake them when the steamer hove in sight.

At first the boys declined the sleep, but soon their weariness and drowsiness overcame even their young enthusiasm, and they gladly stretched themselves out on the ferryman's bunk, and in five minutes more they were continuing their journey to California on the wings of sleep.

At this date, 1849, steamboating was in its infancy; and the rude, uncomfortable steamers of those days were about as much like the palatial structures that plough through the waters of to-day as the rough log cabins of the pioneers were like the elegant homes now occupied by their descendants. This was especially true of the boats that plied up and down the Western rivers, as the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the Missouri were then termed. They were unsightly, uncomfortable, and dangerous; apt to blow up and to catch fire, and in constant peril from the huge trees floating in the current and the snags hidden beneath the waters. Indeed, travellers were often gravely cautioned to keep as near the stern

of the boat as possible, "because the steamboats generally blew up forward." And yet these same ungainly and dangerous crafts were the marvels of their generation, and played a most important part in the great movement West, when the waterways were the most accessible highways westward, and the transcontinental railroad was yet but a dream of visionary men.

It was nearing the noon hour before the distant whistle of one of these "barges of Western civilisation" warned the ferryman that it was time to awaken the two boys, who were still sleeping soundly.

"Hi, there, you boys!" he yelled, sticking his head in the door of the room where they lay. "Wake up! Wake up! Your steamer didn't blow up. She's a-comin' 'round th' Big Bend like a house afire. Wake up!"

Ray jumped and answered: "All right! Be down in a minute!" Then he rubbed his eyes and stared around the room. "Jee-my'-mee! I thought that was old Thompson calling," and he leaped out of the bunk and rushed out of the room, followed by Arthur.

"Where, where's the boat?" and both boys stared blankly at the empty steamboat landing. "Where's the boat?" and their eyes looked excitedly up the river.

"Them's her smoke chimneys, them two tall black things belchin' out smoke that you can see marchin' 'round that p'int of land, an' I reckon th' boat's comin' along with them," and the ferryman pointed a long finger up the river.

Ray and Arthur watched the approach of the steamboat with fascinated eyes. It was the first steamboat they had ever seen; and as the puffing and snorting monster, breathing smoke and flame, drew up to the

landing, with machinery creaking and groaning and help shouting, it seemed to the two boys like some marvellous conveyance newly arrived from another world, and ready to bear them away to a land of strange and unknown wonders; and it was not without a feeling of awe and dread that they walked up the gangplank and stood on the boat's deck, tightly gripping their bundles and staring, with excited eyes and flushed faces, at the strange scene of which they were now themselves a part. They felt as if their great journey to the Land of Gold was now, indeed, about to be fittingly begun on this uncanny monster that swam the waters of the great river like some huge duck.

"Well, this is a little more exciting and interesting than hoeing corn!" Arthur exclaimed, his eyes shining. "I didn't suppose a steamboat was like this! My but isn't it big? There must be 'most a hundred people on it, besides I don't know how many horses and waggons on the lower deck; and to think that steam, just ordinary everyday steam that comes puffing out of a teakettle, pulls all this load, boat and all, over the water faster than a team can run. It's wonderful!" and the poor boy, who had never before travelled a dozen miles in all his young life, gazed up and down the length of the boat with astonished eyes.

"It's great!" was Ray's emphatic response. "Makes a fellow feel as if something was doing. Wonder if all these folks are bound for California, too?" and his eyes roamed curiously over the men and women and children who had all come out on deck to witness the landing of the boat. "I'll bet that big fellow in a broad-brimmed hat standing over there by the stairway is going. I can see California sticking out all over

his face and clothes. He's beginning to dress like a miner already. Miners always wear broad-brimmed hats and woollen shirts and belts—Jee-my'-mee! What was that?" and Ray jumped about two feet up in the air and stared wildly above his head.

"That," smiled a tall, lank man, standing a few feet away from the boys, "was the silvery voice of the steamboat whistle, warning all good folks that this boat is about to pull out; and if you don't want to go along you'd better be making some quick moves for the shore."

"Wh-e-w!" and Ray stared in admiring wonder at the steam whistle. "That beats old Thompson's dinner-horn all hollow!"

"Come, lads," and the tall man looked inquiringly at Ray and Arthur. "If you don't want your folks to be doing some tall worrying about you, you had better be making a break for dry land. This boat's going to pull out in about two jerks of one lamb's tail."

"Old Thompson is the only one that'll do any worrying about us," Arthur answered, smiling at the thought of how the old farmer's face must have looked that morning when he found the loft empty; "and he'd be only too glad to get rid of us if he didn't need our work. We're not wanting to get off the boat. Thank you. We, Ray and I, are going to California to dig for gold," and Arthur insensibly drew himself up proudly, and no wonder, for it was a big statement to be made by so small a boy.

The man regarded them curiously for a moment, a quizzical smile on his face. "Running away, are you?" and the smile broadened. "And going to California to dig for gold? Well, that'll be great fun, and I've a no-

tion to go along with you. What do you say to Jedidiah Judson, Jed Jud for short, for a partner?" and he bowed with extravagant courtesy to the two boys.

"Oh, you'd do on a pinch," Arthur answered a bit saucily. "But we're not running away, leastwise not from anybody who has any right to us; and I don't think we'd care for a partner, at least not just yet. But when we do, we'll think of you," he concluded magnanimously.

"Thank you," and Jed Judson laughed. "Well," he added heartily, "I'm glad to get acquainted with you two boys anyhow. Shake, comrades, I'm bound for the Land of Gold, too," and he gripped the hand of each boy warmly.

At this moment the gangplank was pulled in, the whistle blew again, a bell tinkled, and, with fearful groanings, the engines started, the two great paddle-wheels began to revolve, the boat slowly moved away from the landing, and the fateful journey to far-off California, the Land of Gold, was fairly begun.

CHAPTER THREE

RAY PICKS UP A CARD

"CAN you tell us where we can find the captain, Mr. Judson?" and Ray turned from watching the fast receding buildings of the steamboat landing to the tall man, who still stood near. "We want to see him about working our way to St. Louis. You see we haven't very much money, and we want to save all that we can of it for our outfits and expenses while crossing the plains and mountains."

"That's him," answered Mr. Judson, pointing to a short, thick-set man standing near the door of what the boys afterward learned was the captain's cabin. "Just tell him that Jed Judson sent you to him, and I shouldn't wonder if he'd find something for you to do. I happen to know that he's a little short of help," he added, with a merry twinkle in his pleasant blue eyes.

Ray and Arthur thanked their new friend, and at once hurried away to interview the captain.

Captain Bently, of the *Queen of the Ohio*, as the steamer was named, received them brusquely, as was befitting a man of his importance when dealing with boys. "Work your way to St. Louis!" he exclaimed, staring arrogantly at the two lads, as soon as Arthur had made known their wish to work their passage. "And pray, what do you suppose I am running this

steamboat for? 'Tain't no charity institution where you can work for your board and keep. It's a steamboat, an' run on business principles," and he swelled visibly before the eyes of the quailing boys. "Work your way! What could two country lubbers like you do? No, you'll hand over the cash, my sons, or off you go at the next landing."

"But Mr. Jedidiah Judson sent us to you. He told us that you were short of help, and would be almost sure to find something for us to do," stammered Ray.

"Hey! What's that? Jedidiah Judson sent you!" and Captain Bently stopped short in the doorway of his cabin, which he had been about to enter, and turned to the two lads with something like a gruff heartiness in his manner. "Want to work your way to St. Louis, do you? Well, well, let me see. Ah, I have it," and Captain Bently strode to the head of the stairway leading to the deck below and bellowed: "Tim, Tim Sullivan!"

"Ay, ay, sorr!" came bellowing back up the stairway.

"I'm sending down two boys to work their passage to St. Louis. Give them a job at wood-slinging."

"All right, sorr."

"Report to Tim Sullivan below," and the captain turned to Ray and Arthur. "He'll tell you what to do," and the pompous official hurried back to his cabin, while the boys started down-stairs, wondering not a little why the name of Jedidiah Judson had wrought so marvellously in their favour.

Tim Sullivan was a brawny, good-natured, red-headed Irishman. He greeted the boys with a broad

smile of welcome, and informed them that their work would be to help load the wood used in firing the engine, and for which the boat stopped at certain places along the river bank, where great quantities of wood had been cut and piled ready for loading.

" Begorra, an' it's all fun excipt whin your worrkin', an' thin ye've got to make your arms go loik steam pistons, bedad," he explained. " Now, hoist yourselves up on thot woodpile an' watch the landscape run by. I'll not be wantin' ye for the loik of an hour or more, not until the nixt wood-landin'," and he waved a huge hand toward a pile of cord-wood on the deck.

Ray and Arthur climbed upon the wood and sat down. Everything about them was new and strange to their eyes, from the great boat and its contents, now moving swiftly through the water, to the fleeing shore. Only a little ways from where they sat were the great boilers of the engine, with two men almost constantly throwing sticks of cord-wood into their glowing fire-boxes. They could see the mighty machinery at work, the great bars of steel that moved the shafts that turned the paddle-wheels jerking back and forth like the arms of an enormously muscular giant. It was a fascinating sight, and it was long before they could take their eyes from it. The deck was crowded with men and women and children and horses and waggons and merchandise of every kind. There was something interesting to see in whatever direction they turned their eyes; and the time passed so quickly that it seemed only a few minutes to the two boys, though in reality it was nearly two hours, before the boat turned shoreward and stopped at a small wharf nearly covered with a great pile of cord-wood.

"Now, me hearties, get a quick move on you and show us what thim arms of yourn are good for!" shouted Tim Sullivan.

Half a dozen men, with Ray and Arthur among them, sprang on to the wharf, and began tossing the sticks of cord-wood on board, working as if their lives depended on getting that wood on the boat as quickly as possible. In half an hour the wood was loaded and the boat again moving on her way down the river; and Ray and Arthur had had their first taste of working their way on a river steamboat.

"Hu!" Arthur ejaculated, as he sank down completely exhausted on a bundle of blankets that lay near the cord-wood now piled up high on the deck. "I don't believe I could have stood it another five minutes to save my life. Every muscle was all of a-tremble when I slung that last stick on board; but I wasn't going to let them men know how near tuckered I was. I hope we don't strike another wood-landing for a week."

"My sentiments, too," laughed Ray. "It's worse than binding oats in harvest time while it lasts, but, thank goodness, it don't last long. Tim hit it about right, didn't he, when he said, 'It's all fun excipt whin your worrkin', and thin ye've got to make your arms go loik piston rods,'" and Ray gratefully stretched out his tired legs and arms and back on the pile of blankets by the side of Arthur.

For nearly an hour the boys lay on the blankets too tired to move; but youth quickly recovers itself, and at the end of that time they were up and about, eager to see all that was going on. Tim Sullivan told them that they would not reach the next wood-landing until about ten o'clock that night, and gave them permission

to wander at will over the boat until that time. After the ten-o'clock loading they could go to bed and sleep until he awoke them for the next wood-landing, which would be sometime around five o'clock in the morning. Ray and Arthur thanked him, and at once set out to explore the boat.

They found the poorer passengers—men, women, and children—crowded together, along with horses and waggons and all sorts of merchandise, on the lower deck. On the upper deck were the wealthier passengers, largely made up of those who were able to hire staterooms. A long, narrow cabin ran through the centre of this deck, from end to end, opening into staterooms on both sides, and with a long table running through its centre, and the stern end partitioned off into a small ladies' cabin. The bar occupied the extreme other end of the long cabin. Men sat in groups along the table playing cards, and in front of the bar, smoking and drinking and talking loudly and excitedly, was an ever-changing throng made up of men of nearly all nationalities and vocations. Southern planters, Northern farmers, Western hunters, merchants, lawyers, doctors, gamblers, sports, all were represented there; and, judging from their talk, nearly all of them were on their way to the gold-fields of California. Near the end of the table next to the bar sat four men playing cards; and as Ray and Arthur passed by these men they saw a card drop from the hands of one of the men and fall, apparently, unnoticed to the floor.

"You dropped a card, mister," and, stooping quickly, Ray picked up the fallen card and offered it to the man who had dropped it, who, to Ray's astonishment, whirled quickly around in his chair, and told him

angrily to mind his own business, that he had dropped no card.

"But I saw it fall from your hand," protested the surprised boy, still keeping his hand extended with the card in it.

The man's face whitened; but before he could again speak one of the other men quickly arose from his chair, and, reaching out his hand, demanded: "Let me see that card, youngster," and he caught the card out of Ray's hand. The instant his eyes fell on the face of the card he turned, with blazing eyes, on the first man, who, white and trembling, had jumped to his feet. "You infernal cheat! You black-leg gambler!" he yelled. "You'd cheat me out of my hard-earned money, would you?" and his right fist shot out straight from his shoulder, and catching the gambler under the jaw, lifted him off his feet and sent him to the floor like a log.

In an instant the boys found themselves in the centre of a yelling, pushing, excited mass of men, who surged threateningly around the gambler and his enraged antagonist.

For a brief moment the gambler lay stunned; then he leaped to his feet, his face white as chalk, his eyes flashing like points of fire, and his right hand going back swiftly toward his hip pocket; but before he could draw his pistol, a dozen hands had seized him, and he was disarmed.

In those rougher days men did not always wait for the slow process of the law to mete out justice, and in half an hour the gambler had been tried and condemned to be put ashore, without arms or food, to find his way as best he could to some settlement. Nor was

this as light a punishment as it might appear, for the region through which the boat was passing at that time was an almost unbroken wilderness of huge trees and thick underbrush.

The captain was at once notified of the decision, and the steamer slowed down. A boat was lowered, and the gambler, who was known to the fraternity as Slim George, was placed in it, rowed to the shore, and left standing alone in the midst of a desolate wilderness of trees and bushes.

" My boy, if you ever meet that cur again you want to look out for him," and the man who had knocked Slim George down laid a friendly hand on Ray's shoulder. " He'll do you dirt, if he ever gets the chance, the ornery cuss! I saw him take a good long look at your face, as if he wanted to photograph it on his memory. He hates you worse than pisen, because you spoiled his little game and got him into all this trouble. Now, you did me a mighty good turn, young fellow, when you picked up that card; and if there's anything Tom Rawlins can do for you kids, why speak right out in meeting. You'll find Tom Rawlins there every time."

Tom Rawlins was a huge, massively built man, fully six feet and four inches in height, and as strong and sturdy looking as an oak tree. He stood straight as an arrow, and held his shoulders squarely, while he handled his massive frame with the ease and grace of a trained athlete. His face went well with his huge body, square and massy, with a touch of a good-natured bulldog in it that gave him a look of resolution and courage that fitted well with his physical appearance. His eyes were blue, the blue of flashing steel when angry. Altogether he looked like a tremendously fine

fellow to have for a friend, and a fearfully bad man to have for an enemy.

Indeed, this was Ray's first thought, when, somewhat to his confusion, the young giant had laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and spoken his words of friendly warning and thanks, as the lad stood watching the boat carrying Slim George, the gambler, to the shore; and many times afterward he had occasion to remember the justness of this first impression of Tom Rawlins. He certainly made a tremendously fine fellow to have for a friend; but Heaven pity the man who made an enemy of Tom Rawlins!

"Oh, I didn't know— Thank you," stammered Ray, in response to the big man's hearty words. "He dropped his card and I thought I'd be polite and hand it back to him."

"And he didn't appreciate your politeness a little bit, did he?" laughed the man. "Well, he knows the weight of Tom Rawlins's fist now, and I reckon he'll take a long look at the next feller before he tries any of his cheating games on him. A man has got to stand on his own feet in this world, my boy, and sometimes," he added with a laugh, "if he keeps on his own feet he's got to knock the other feller off his underpinning. Remember, yell for Tom Rawlins if you're in trouble, and he'll come like a house afire," and he hurried away to another part of the boat.

Ray and Arthur had both had enough excitement for the immediate present, and they remained on deck by themselves, watching the swiftly passing shores and talking in low, excited voices over the wonderful happenings of the day, and planning and dreaming of the still more wonderful days yet to come. When it became

too dark to see they went below, so as to be on hand when Tim Sullivan wanted them. The boat reached the wood-landing a little after ten o'clock; and for another half hour they were worked until it seemed as if their arms and legs and backs must break in two, but at last the last stick was on board, and they were at liberty to go to bed. Tim Sullivan gave each of them a couple of blankets, and pointing out a sheltered spot on the floor of the deck, bade them roll themselves up in their blankets and go to sleep.

"Say, but we've had a great old time to-day, haven't we, Ray?" Arthur murmured, as he snuggled up to Ray under the blankets. "My, but I am tired and sleepy!"

"You bet!" was Ray's emphatic response. "I like Tom Rawlins, don't you, Art?"

But there came no reply from Arthur, for the tired boy was already sound asleep; and Ray closed his eyes, and soon followed him to the land of dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STEAMBOAT RACE

THE two boys awoke the next morning, "feeling," as Arthur expressed it, "as if they'd been made over brand-new," except for a slight stiffness and soreness of the muscles, which soon wore off. Their work, although exceedingly hard while it lasted, occupied but a small part of their time; and the good-natured Irishman, Tim Sullivan, allowed them to do as they pleased with the unemployed balance, only stipulating that they be on hand promptly whenever a wood-landing was made. This the boys gladly promised, and conscientiously fulfilled.

They spent the greater portion of their time listening to the men talking of the wonderful gold mines of California. It seemed as if nearly every man on board was bound for that marvellous land of the shining gold; and nobody could talk or think of anything else but the gold, and how to get to it, and what they would do when they had made their "pile." Wonderful stories were circulated of the rich "finds" that had been made, and implicitly believed. At every stopping place newspapers were eagerly bought and anxiously scanned for the latest gold news, and at every fresh story of the richness of this new Eldorado the excitement grew.

All were gold mad, and, because of this madness, were rushing forth, many of them blindly, across a continent, in the face of perils and hardships that no sane man would think of enduring except at the bidding of this same Yellow God, whose throne is red, and ever has been and ever will be, with the blood of his maddened worshippers. And before the night of the second day Ray and Arthur were as mad as the maddest, and, boy-like, were building castles, whose pinnacles shone golden far above the highest clouds, and whose foundations rested on the yet undug yellow gold of far-off California. But early on the morning of the third day there came to the good steamboat, the *Queen of the Ohio*, a greater even than the gold god, the thing men call Death; and under the dark shadows of his black wings no eyes searched for the yellow gleam of gold, but "Life! Life!" was the one imploring cry of all.

Shortly after sunrise, on this fatal morning, the *Queen of the Ohio* steamed into the muddy waters of the Mississippi, and swung northward on her way to St. Louis; and in doing this she came abreast another steamer, the *Lady Belle*, coming up the Mississippi from the south and also bound for St. Louis. For a time the two boats swam side by side, not more than one hundred feet apart, while the captains, the crews, and the passengers shouted greetings to one another, and exchanged news. The two boats looked much the same so far as size and general appearance went, but the *Lady Belle* was evidently the newer boat. Both boats were crowded with passengers and overloaded with merchandise.

Presently the *Lady Belle* began to draw ahead, just

a little, and slowly. Then the passengers on the *Lady Belle* began to wave their handkerchiefs, and call "good-byes," and some one sung out boastfully: "When we get to St. Louis we'll tell them that you're coming, too"; and a man in the stern of the *Lady Belle* yelled: "We'll make you eat our smoke clear to St. Louis"; and then the black smoke began to pour out of the smoke-stacks of both the boats, and everybody on board knew that the most exciting of sports, a steamboat race, was on.

When the race began Ray and Arthur were standing on the hurricane deck, leaning against the railing, with their eyes closely watching the *Lady Belle.*

"Do you know," Arthur said, as the *Lady Belle* began gradually moving ahead, "these two boats make me think of two country fellows, each with his fast horse in the buggy and his best girl by his side, coming together on a country road. There's bound to be a race, and it's bound to be a mighty exciting one while it lasts. Now, I don't believe the *Queen of the Ohio* is going to let the *Lady Belle* steam away from her like this, no more than one of them country fellows would let the other pass him without whipping up his horse and trying his level best to show him that his horse is the fastest."

"Of course she won't," declared Ray positively. "Can't you see the black smoke pouring out of her chimneys? That means pitch-pine, and pitch-pine means that she's getting up steam in a hurry. I'm sure we're going faster already. See, the *Lady Belle* isn't gaining on us any longer. Hurrah, we're gaining on her! We're beating her! Hurrah!" and both boys, in their excitement, took off their hats, and swung them around their

heads, and yelled; and nearly everybody else on the boat was doing the same thing, for by now the race excitement had got into the blood of all.

The *Queen of the Ohio* gained steadily until she passed the *Lady Belle*, and slowly drew ahead until she was a good boat-length in the lead; and then everybody shouted tauntingly to everybody on the *Lady Belle*. A deck-hand stood up on the railing in the stern of the boat and flapped his arms and crowed like a rooster. Somebody advised the *Lady Belle* to grease her paddle-wheels. A man wanted to know if the *Lady Belle* had any messages to send to St. Louis, and volunteered to carry them if she had. "You'll make us eat your smoke clear to St. Louis, will you?" yelled another. "Who's eating our smoke now?" "Good-bye, Lady, I must leave you," sang some one, with more enthusiasm than music, and everybody yelled and joined in the song, and the taunting words rang out far over the water to the distant shores.

But presently it was noticed that the *Queen of the Ohio* did not seem to be gaining any more on the *Lady Belle*. Then the *Lady Belle* began creeping nearer and nearer, inch by inch, until her prow was even with the stern of the *Queen of the Ohio*, and still she gained.

The excitement now became intense. Men rushed to the captain and implored him not to let that "old scow" get ahead, and down to the boiler-deck and offered the engineers and firemen large cash rewards if they would keep the *Queen of the Ohio* in the lead. The captain walked up and down the "texas" deck, his face red with excitement, and his teeth biting off bits of smoking sulphur for every inch the *Lady Belle* gained. Below the great furnaces flamed and roared,

and the pent steam hissed and screamed through the safety-valves, while the arms of the great engines shot swiftly back and forth with an energy that shook the boat from stem to stern. On the decks men, women, and children crowded together, yelling and hurrahing.

Only one man in the midst of all this excitement remained calm. He was the imperturbable pilot, who stood in his little glass house, his hands gripping the spokes of his wheel, his keen eyes on the river, and his face as emotionless as the face of the clock that ticked calmly away on the wall above his head. Whatever happened he must remain calm, for the fate of that great steamboat and every living thing on her depended on his keeping his head. There were sunken snags and hidden rocks and mud-banks and sand-bars and shoals all down on that wonderful map of the river in his memory, and all these must be remembered and avoided at exactly the right moment, or out there in the muddy waters of the swirling Mississippi there would be a terrible disaster. No living man knew this better than did the pilot himself, and the thought of that awful responsibility kept him cool. It was a part of his education that he learned when he learned the river.

Still, in spite of everything the pilot, the captain, and the crew could do, the *Lady Belle* continued to gain. Inch by inch her prow overhauled the length of the *Queen of the Ohio*. Soon she was abreast—then ahead!

Captain Bently stamped his foot on the deck and glared at the *Lady Belle*. The captain of the *Lady Belle* waved his hand to Captain Bently and shouted good-bye. Captain Bently frowned and shook his fist, and then rushed into his cabin and yelled down the

tube: "Steam! More steam! Don't let that mud-scow beat us, if you have to blow the bolts out of the boilers!"

"Can't make another ounce!" the engineer shouted back. "The safety-valves are screaming like white devils!"

"Blast the safety-valves!" yelled Captain Bently, forgetting discretion in his excitement and rage. "Tie a log on them! The boilers are good for it. Do you think I want every captain on the river laughing at me? Beat the *Lady Belle* to St. Louis, or I'll get an engineer who can. Beat the *Lady Belle!* Do you hear? Beat her!" and Captain Bently rushed back on deck.

Five minutes later Ray gave a glad shout. "Look, Art, look! We are gaining! We are gaining! Oh, I knew we could beat the *Lady Belle!* Hurrah! Now, we will show them what the *Queen of the Ohio* can do!" and the delighted boy fairly danced up and down in his excitement.

The *Queen of the Ohio* continued to gain; but she was evidently doing her utmost. Her frame was all a-quiver from gilded figure-head to stern-post. A few of the more experienced passengers began to look anxiously in the direction of the captain. The pilot's face whitened a trifle, but he kept his eyes fixed on the river ahead and his hands on the spokes of his wheel. On and on sped the *Queen of the Ohio*. Soon she was abreast of the *Lady Belle*—ahead—and each moment she was widening the distance between her and her rival! Now every man, woman, and child on board began to cheer and yell, wildly exulting; and then——

There came a sudden thunderous crash. The deck shot skyward. A shriek, as of one voice, rang out, even

above the awful roar of the rending boat; and the air was filled with struggling human beings and flying scraps of iron and broken timbers.

The boilers of the *Queen of the Ohio* had blown up!

When Ray and Arthur again became conscious of their surroundings, they were struggling in the water not twenty feet away from the wrecked boat and within ten feet of each other. A rain of splintered boards and bits of iron was still falling around them, and the surface of the river was thick with the ruins of the wrecked boat.

Fortunately both boys were unhurt and expert swimmers; and they swam intuitively for a minute or two, their minds in a daze, not yet comprehending the awfulness of the disaster that had so suddenly overwhelmed the *Queen of the Ohio* and all on board of her. Something white, with dark curly hair spread out on the surface of the water, floated near Ray. He stared at it stupidly, wonderingly, for an instant; and then, with a shock that brought his wits back on the jump, he saw that it was a young girl, buoyed up for a few moments on the water by her clothes. The next moment his arm was around her, and he was swimming desperately with his burden toward a floating plank. He reached the plank and tried to lift the senseless child upon it, but his strength was not sufficient, and he was compelled to cling to the friendly plank with one arm, while he held the girl's head out of the water with the other.

At this moment Arthur caught sight of Ray, and, with a cry of joy, started toward him; but just as he was about to place his hands on the plank, his feet struck against something solid, and the next instant the

body of a woman rose out of the water not two feet from his side. With an exclamation of horror Arthur seized the woman and pulled her with him to the plank, and there he clung, with one arm around the plank and the other holding the woman's head above the water.

A horrible medley of cries came from all around them—shrieks and groans and agonising calls for help and prayers for mercy and curses; and they saw that the surrounding waters were dotted with frantically struggling human beings. A woman, battling desperately to keep afloat and screaming for help every moment her mouth was out of the water, fought for her life not a rod from where they were; but the boys were powerless to help her. The senseless burdens in their arms tied them to the plank. With joy they saw a strong swimmer hurrying to her rescue. The swimmer seized the woman, towed her to the plank, and told her to hold on to it, that a boat would soon pick her up. Then he turned to the two boys, and they saw that the swimmer was Tom Rawlins. The blood was trickling from a hurt on his head, and his face was white with the horror of the awful thing that had happened, yet he smiled when he saw Ray and Arthur.

"Keep up courage, lads," he said cheerily, "and hold on to that woman and child. The boats will soon be here," and then he swam swiftly away to help others.

"Oh, this is terrible! Awful! Look, look at the steamboat, Art! Look!" and Ray's white face became even more ghastly.

Some five rods down the river floated what was left of the *Queen of the Ohio*. Her decks were a mass of splintered timbers and twisted irons, with the two

tall smoke-stacks sticking out of the pile like the legs of a huge black giant. Through this mass spouted hissing columns of steam, and above hung a white steam-cloud. Here and there in this floating mountain of ruins struggled human beings; and the stern of the boat, which had been little damaged by the explosion, was crowded with a frenzied mob of men, women, and children. Even as Ray and Arthur looked black smoke began mingling with the white steam, and the next moment a red tongue of fire leaped high above this awful scene of devastation.

The *Lady Belle*, the moment her officers comprehended what had happened, had swung round, and now was rushing back to render all possible aid to the survivors. Her boats were lowered and manned and hurried to the side of the wrecked steamer as speedily as possible; and as fast as human strength and human skill could accomplish it, the unfortunate beings on the now blazing *Queen of the Ohio* were carried to the safety of the decks of the *Lady Belle*. Life-preservers and ropes were thrown to those struggling in the water; and many a brave man among the passengers and crew leaped into the water, and, at the risk of his life, saved some unfortunate from going down forever under the muddy waters of the Mississippi.

Ray and Arthur clung desperately, each to his end of the plank and to his precious burden. The woman Tom Rawlins had rescued was near the middle of the plank. Presently the girl on Ray's arm moved, opened her eyes, stared wildly around, threw up both arms, and began screaming, "Mother! Mother! Mother!" and struggling violently. Ray tried to quiet her, but he could not. She was crazed with the fear of the water

and the awful situation in which she found herself; and in a moment she had freed herself from his arm and was being borne away by the current. Ray let go of the plank and swam after her; but his clothes were heavy, and the boots on his feet felt like lead; and she sank just as his hand was about to seize the cloth of her dress. Without an instant's hesitation Ray dove, and when he came to the surface the still struggling girl was in his arms. In a moment she had dragged him under, and both went down. This time when Ray came to the top of the water with the girl she lay still; but he was now almost completely exhausted, and the plank was two or more rods away and getting farther every moment. He struck out desperately for it, holding the girl's mouth above the water as best he could; but to do his utmost, burdened by the weight of the child, he could not gain an inch on the plank, borne along on the swift current, and his strength was fast failing. "Arthur! Arthur!" he called; but Arthur was powerless to aid him, for if he released the woman he held, she would drown at once. "Help! Help!" Ray shouted; but the boats were busy elsewhere. "Help! Help!" he screamed in mortal fear; but he still clung to the girl, whose dead weight was dragging him down, down. He felt all his strength leaving him, felt himself sinking; but even then, as he went down with a last desperate effort, he thrust the girl's head up out of the water.

At that moment a strong hand shot down through the water, and, gripping Ray by the hair of his head, jerked him quickly to the surface.

"Lie still and hold on to the girl!" shouted a voice in his ear, and Ray felt himself pulled swiftly through the water, and in three minutes more his hands gripped

the wood of the plank, and he turned and saw that he had been saved by Tom Rawlins.

"Now just keep a tight hold on that plank, youngster, and rest yourself. I'll take care of the girl," and Tom Rawlins's strong arm lifted the still senseless child half out of the water and laid her gently across the plank. "Here comes a boat, and we'll all soon be safe on board the *Lady Belle*. Hi, ho! have a care there, or you'll capsize this craft!" he called to Arthur, who had suddenly found himself struggling with the woman he had rescued and who had just come to sufficiently to become hysterical with fright. "Hold on to the girl." This to Ray—and with swift strokes Tom Rawlins swam to the aid of Arthur; and there was need, for both by this time were struggling frantically in the water away from the safety of the plank.

"Get back to the plank," Rawlins commanded Arthur the moment he had freed him from the grip of the woman. "You're pretty near tuckered." Then catching the woman by the hair of her head so that she could not get hold of him, he swam with her toward the rapidly approaching boat.

In ten minutes more the five of them were safely on board the *Lady Belle*, where everything possible was done for the safety and comfort of the survivors. But it had been a dreadful disaster. Captain Bently, the pilot, the engineer, two or three of the crew, and a few of the passengers were never seen again. They had either perished on the burning steamer or sank, never to rise again, beneath the waters of the Mississippi. Many had been badly hurt; and the cabins of the *Lady Belle* were transformed into an improvised hospital. When all had been done at the scene of the catastrophe

that could be done, the *Lady Belle* hurried to the nearest river town, and there left the bodies of the dead and the hurt to the friendly care of the horror-stricken citizens, and continued on her way up the river to St. Louis, taking with her such passengers of the unfortunate *Queen of the Ohio* as cared to go.

CHAPTER FIVE

MILDRED

RAY and Arthur remained on board the *Lady Belle.*

On the second morning after the disaster, as the two boys stood on the deck watching the shores and planning what they would do when the boat reached St. Louis, Jedidiah Judson came up suddenly behind them, and laid a hand on the shoulder of each lad.

"I want you two boys to come with me," Jedidiah Judson said, as his hand gripped each lad by the shoulder. "I want you two boys to come with me, now." His face was white and thin, but his eyes were shining. "You're wanted at once in the ladies' cabin. There is some one there who wants to see you right away," and he started off, pushing the two lads in front of him.

"What—what is the matter?" stammered Ray. "Who—who wants to see us? We don't know a living soul on this boat."

"Well, there's some one who wants to know you, all right," Jed Judson answered emphatically. "So come right along, lads."

Ray glanced apprehensively at Arthur. "I'll bet it's old Thompson," he whispered. "He has followed us, and now he is going to try and make us go back with him."

"Well, we won't go!" Arthur answered shortly, his jaws coming together with a snap. "I'd die before I'd go back to his old farm to starve. California and the gold mines for me."

"Me, too!" Ray declared emphatically. "Who wants to see us?" and he turned a bit defiantly to Jed Judson. "Because it might be somebody we didn't want to see," he ended truthfully if not wisely.

"Well, they want to see you mighty bad, so trot along lively," rejoined Jed Judson, his blue eyes twinkling.

At the door of the ladies' cabin Arthur paused long enough to whisper to Ray: "It can't be old Thompson. He wouldn't be waiting for us in the ladies' cabin. Who can it be?" Then Jed Judson pushed the door open, and ushered the boys in.

Near the door sat a white-faced lady and a little girl, who, the moment Ray and Arthur entered, jumped to their feet and hurried toward them.

"Here they are!" almost shouted Jed Judson. "Now, just show them how you feel toward the two lads who saved your lives at the risk of their own."

By this time the woman had hold of both of Arthur's hands, and was trying to thank him in a voice choking with sobs, while the tears streamed from her eyes, for so heroically saving her at the recent disaster; and, when words failed, she threw her motherly arms around his neck and, drawing his face close, gave him the two most precious things in the world, a mother's kiss and blessing.

The girl ran straight to Ray. Ray flushed, and looked as if he wanted to run; but before the confused boy could make up his mind just what to do, the girl

had her arms around his neck, and was squeezing him tight and kissing him and thanking him for saving her life and crying all at the same time. For a full minute Ray was too astounded and dumfounded and confounded and embarrassed to make a move, but stood with his arms hanging down limply by his side, his face as red as hot blood could make it; and then he tore himself from the girl's arms and made a break for the door—only to run straight into the arms of Mr. Jedidiah Judson, who at once seized his two hands and began shaking them so violently that Ray thought sure he would jerk them from his shoulders; and then he too, began thanking him for saving the life of his precious little girl, his darling Mildred.

"But—but I didn't save her! Honest and truly I didn't!" stammered Ray, with as much fervour as if he had been accused of committing some heinous crime. "It was Big Tom Rawlins. He saved both of us. We were both sinking when he pulled us back to the plank."

"I know, I know. Tom Rawlins has told me all about it. How you even tried to hold Mildred's head out of the water when you were sinking, and so I don't care for any explanations from you, young man. Now, come over here and let my wife tell you what she thinks of you," and gripping Ray by both shoulders, Jedidiah Judson shoved the boy in front of him to where Arthur was vainly trying to convince Mrs. Judson that she really owed her life to Tom Rawlins and not to him at all.

Two hours later the five of them, Mr. and Mrs. Judson and Mildred and Ray and Arthur, stood together on the deck of the steamer, watching the distant city of St. Louis, which the boat was now rapidly

nearing. That long talk in the ladies' cabin had done great things for Ray and Arthur. In the first place it had given them three friends, and neither of the two boys could remember of ever having had even one friend before; and if any of you boys who read this are friendless and homeless or ever have been, you will understand exactly how much this meant to Ray and Arthur without another word from me; but if you have always had a home and friends, you can never understand, never, the happiness that now filled Ray and Arthur, and overflowed through their faces and tongues as they stood on the deck with their friends—their friends. Then there was another great thing that this long talk in the ladies' cabin had done for Ray and Arthur. It had given them friends for companions on the long journey across the plains and over the mountains to the Land of Gold, for Jedidiah Judson and his wife and child were also bound for the gold mines, and they had insisted that Ray and Arthur should join them for "mutual help and comfort," as the good Mrs. Judson put it; and the boys had willingly agreed to do so, providing they would be allowed to pay their share of the expenses.

"And so we're to be partners after all," Mr. Judson had laughed when everything had been settled to the satisfaction of everybody.

"Oh, I'm so glad you boys are going with us!" Mildred exclaimed for possibly the thousandth time, her plump cheeks dimpling and flushing rosily, as the five friends stood together on the deck viewing with interest the approaching city. "And won't it be great fun to travel in a covered waggon and sleep in a tent for days and days and days. 'Twill be just like going

on a picnic every day. I like to go to picnics, don't you?" And then, without pausing an instant for either boy to reply, she continued: "I thought I was going to have an awful lonesome time of it, for even a picnic would get lonesome if you were the only little girl there, wouldn't it? But now I know I won't, because I've got you two boys to play with. You'll be like brothers to me, won't you? I have always wanted a brother. They're so handy when you want anything done," and on and on rattled Mildred's tongue, while Ray and Arthur were content to just look and listen; and well they might be, for a fairer, sweeter-looking young girl than Mildred Judson could not have been found anywhere. At least that is what Ray and Arthur thought as they watched the most bewitching dimpling smiles come and go on her plump, rosy-cheeked face as she laughed and shook her dark-brown curls and made pretty little gestures with her hands while talking to them.

"Now, Dimples," and her father turned and playfully clapped the palm of his hand over her red lips, "supposing you give Ray's and Arthur's ears a chance to rest, while you go with your mother to our stateroom to help pack up. The boat will land in St. Louis in half an hour, and we want to be ready to go ashore at once. I'll take care of the boys while you are away. But hurry, for we're going right ashore as soon as the boat lands, and if you're not on hand you'll get left, see?" and he gave a red cheek a mischievous pinch.

"Don't you dare, Papa Judson, don't you dare to take one step off this boat without mamma and me. If you do, I'll never speak to you again," and shaking

her curls and laughing, Mildred ran after her mother, who was already on her way to the stateroom.

The *Lady Belle* was now rapidly approaching St. Louis, and in a short time had reached the long line of wharfs that lay abreast of the city. At that date, when steamboating on the river was in its prime, the wharfs of St. Louis were the noisiest and busiest places in the world. Steamboats, two and three tier deep, lay all along the river front, discharging and taking on their passengers and cargoes. Throngs of men rushed back and forth continually; mountains of freight were piled everywhere; armies of drays and baggage vans hurried hither and thither, their drivers shouting and cursing; roustabouts sang their loading and unloading songs; mates and officers shouted orders and swore fluently; windlasses, lowering freight into the holds, creaked and whizzed and whirred; bells and gongs clanged; steam from exhaust pipes hissed; and hither and thither among all this noise and confusion dodged the passengers, going and coming from the boats, their arms and hands laden with packages and bundles and babies, and with frightened, crying children clinging close to dresses and hands. Such was the river front of St. Louis in the good old steamboat days, now already a part of our country's wonderful history; and it was into such a scene of distracting noises and confusion that the good steamboat the *Lady Belle* pushed her prow on the morning when Ray and Arthur and their new-found friends stood on her deck waiting to disembark.

"Mercy! What a racket!" exclaimed Mildred, clapping her two hands over her ears and laughing, while her eyes danced with excitement. "How can we

ever get ashore? and how will we know what to do with ourselves when we do get there? If my papa wasn't here I'd be too afraid to move; but papa knows how to do everything, and he isn't afraid to go anywhere. I am so glad that you have got my papa to help you now; and you needn't be the least bit frightened. He'll 'tend to everything," and the little maid looked up reassuringly into the faces of Ray and Arthur.

By this time the *Lady Belle* had reached her mooring; and our friends hurried ashore, Mildred clinging to one of her father's arms, while his wife hung to the other, and the amazed boys followed close behind.

It had been decided to spend four days in St. Louis, in order to buy here as much of the outfit needed for the long journey across the plains as possible, where things were cheaper than they would be in Independence, the last outpost of mercantile civilisation on the trail to California, until Salt Lake City was reached. Nearly everything that Mr. Judson had brought with him from the East had been destroyed when the *Queen of the Ohio* was lost; and consequently he was obliged to completely re-outfit himself. Ray and Arthur had nothing but the clothes on their backs; and their outfits, too, must be purchased. They had little idea of what they would need, but fortunately they found a wise and experienced adviser in Jedidiah Judson, who in his earlier manhood had been a hunter on these very plains, and had accompanied more than one waggon train to Santa Fé; and, with his help, before they left the city of St. Louis, a goodly part of their money had been wisely and economically invested in necessary food, arms, and clothing for the long journey overland to California.

CHAPTER SIX

EAGLE FEATHER

EARLY on the morning of the fifth day after the arrival of our friends in St. Louis, Ray and Arthur entered the waiting room of the hotel where they were stopping, and glanced eagerly around. Almost at the same moment a door near the other end of the room opened, and Jedidiah Judson walked in.

"Hello, thought I'd beat you boys, sure!" he greeted them cheerily; "but I see you're about one jerk of a lamb's tail ahead of me. Got everything packed and ready? The boat leaves in one hour, and we'll go right on board as soon as Dimples and her mother come down. Women folks are slow. Takes one woman longer to dress than it would forty men."

"We're all ready," responded Arthur, glancing at the neatly packed bundles that lay at their feet, "and anxious to get off just as soon as we can. How long will it take the boat to get to Independence?"

"About six or seven days," Mr. Judson answered. "You see, it's up-stream, and the boat's got to fight against the current all the way, and the current of the Missouri River's a mighty hard proposition to buck against at this time of the year— Hi, ho! Here comes the delinquents, and loaded down like two burros!"

he cried, as Mrs. Judson and Mildred entered the room, burdened with bundles and packages. "Reckon you'll have to give a helping hand, boys."

But Ray and Arthur were already on their way to relieve Mildred and her mother of as many of their bundles as they could possibly carry in addition to their own; and when this had been done, with much joking and laughing, all set out to board the steamboat that was to bear them to Independence, and which was tied to her wharf only a short distance away.

The boat was jammed with human beings and merchandise bound for the far gold mines of California. To the inexperienced eyes of Ray and Arthur it seemed as if everybody from everywhere had started for California, and the two boys began to have grave fears that there would not be gold enough to go around when all got there. Nearly all of the available space of the boiler-deck was covered with the waggons and equipments of the California emigrants. The greater number of the waggons were of that huge variety known as prairie-schooners, from a fancied resemblance of their great bellying canvas tops to the sails of a schooner; and when heavily loaded, these unwieldy vehicles required several teams of horses or yokes of oxen to draw them. One of the largest of these waggons was the property of Jedidiah Judson; and under its capacious cover was snugly stowed away the goods purchased by Jed and the two boys in St. Louis.

"Where is our waggon?" Mildred asked eagerly the moment her feet were safely on the deck. "I want to go to it right off. I want to see what it looks like, my new home on wheels," and she laughed while her

cheeks dimpled and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"That's it!" and Ray pointed eagerly to a large prairie-schooner that stood well in front of a dozen or more other waggons. "Isn't it a beauty? And it's extra strong; and we've got a tent stowed away inside that we can use whenever we wish to; and—" But Mildred was already half-way to the waggon, darting here and there among the hurrying men and the piles of merchandise; and Ray found that he had more need of his legs than he had of his tongue if he would keep by the side of the lively girl.

"Oh, it is a beauty!" and Mildred paused directly in front of it and surveyed with delighted eyes the waggon in all its glory of fresh paint and snowy canvas. "And won't it be fun to live in it, to ride in it, and sleep in it! Now, I must see what it looks like inside," and she started to climb up in the front end of the waggon, but Ray and Arthur both caught hold of her, one of each arm.

"Look, look here first! See what's here first!" Arthur cried excitedly, pulling her to one side of the waggon.

"See, there! That's the name of our prairie-schooner!" and Ray pointed triumphantly to the side of the waggon-box, whereon was emblazoned, in beautifully formed and decorated letters, the name the boys themselves had chosen for their waggon.

"Oh!" and Mildred's cheeks flushed and dimpled with pleasure. "Why, it's my name! It's Mildred! You have named the waggon after me!"

"And it's on the other side, too," Arthur informed her joyously. "Come and see." And Mildred had to

go around to the other side of the waggon and have a look at the name from that point of view.

"Now," and Arthur jumped upon the waggon-tongue, "we'll see what our house looks like inside. Right this way, up the grand stairway and through the great round door," and he stepped from the tongue to the waggon-box, and from the waggon-box to the foot-rest at the top of the box, and from there to the driver's seat just within the cover of the waggon. Mildred and Ray were close behind him.

"Why, it's like a big, round, white cave!" Mildred exclaimed. "But where are we going to sleep?"

"I'll show you," and Arthur stepped to the middle of the waggon, gave a quick pull on two strings, and a heavy curtain fell from the top of the cover to the bottom of the waggon-box, instantly dividing the "White Cave," as Mildred called it, into two parts. "Here's your bedroom," and Arthur raised the curtain and held it up until Mildred and Ray had entered. "Now I'll show you your beds. This," and Arthur laid his hand on a pretty little folding cot which hung on one side of the little room, "is your bed, Mildred, and here is your mother's," and he touched a larger folding cot fastened to the other side of the room; "and you can sleep in them almost as comfortably as you could in your own beds at home. You see the waggon-box is extra wide, jutting out over the wheels for a foot and a half on each side, and this gives you plenty of room to place your beds crosswise."

"But where are you and papa going to sleep?" Mildred asked. "I can see only two cots."

"Why, we don't need cots," Ray laughed. "We are men; and we can just roll ourselves up in our blankets

and sleep any old place—on the ground, or in the tent," and Ray and Arthur both tried to look as big and as manly as possible.

"I don't want to sleep in a cot either," and Mildred looked with disapproval on her pretty little bed. "I just want to roll myself up in my blanket and sleep any old place, too—if—if my papa sleeps there, too," she added a bit hastily.

"Good for you, Dimples. Just keep under the wing of your old dad, and you will be all right," and with a laugh Mr. Judson held up the curtain while Mrs. Judson entered the little room.

Then, for an hour or more, all the wonders of this wonderful waggon were exhibited and commented on, from Mildred's and her mother's private locker under the comfortably cushioned spring seat in the back end of the waggon, with its two little glass-covered openings in the canvas waggon-cover at each end of the seat, through which the occupants of the seat could see whatever was going on without, to the sides and top of the "White Cave," with their innumerable hooks and folding shelves and other conveniences designed especially for the comfort of Mildred and her mother; and everything was heartily approved and declared to be exactly what was needed.

"Why!" Mrs. Judson exclaimed, as she seated herself on the spring seat, "I had no idea you could make such a pleasant and comfortable home out of a waggon. I thought I would have to rough it when we got out on the plains, but this don't look much like roughing it, does it?" and she glanced smilingly around the really cosey-looking canvas-roofed little room. Alas! if she only could have looked into the future at that moment

she would have seen a sufficient amount of "roughing it" to have appalled even her stout heart.

When they climbed out of the waggon the steamer was well on its way up the Missouri, and St. Louis was already out of sight. Mr. and Mrs. Judson went at once to their cabin, but Mildred and the boys were far too curious to care to go inside and stayed outside "to see things," as Ray expressed it.

The boat was loaded until its guards were almost on a level with the water. The upper deck was reserved almost entirely for the use of the passengers, but the lower deck was crowded with the waggons and goods and, in some cases, even the horses and the oxen of the gold-seekers, while the hold was jammed full of every sort of merchandise needed in that far western country.

Nearly every passenger on board was bound for California, that wonderful land of golden hopes, where fortunes that would last a lifetime could be found in a day. There were young men and old men, single men and whole families, poor men and rich men, ignorant men and cultured men, honest men and rogues, all dreaming golden dreams, and all, because of these golden dreams, setting their faces bravely toward the unknown hardships and perils of a long journey across great plains and over high mountains, uninhabited saved by roving bands of savage and hostile Indians. They came, seemingly, from every walk and condition in life. Farmers, merchants, lawyers, doctors, mechanics, gamblers, thieves—the best and the worst of humanity—all were represented there. It was one of the first of those marvellous gold-fever waves that swept over the country—almost over the world—emptying stores, shops, farms, and, in some instances, pulpits;

and filling the wild mountains of California with the most heterogeneous mass of humanity ever before gathered in one place in the history of the world.

Mingling among these peoples from the more settled portions of the country were a number of hunters, trappers, "mountain men," and a small band of Indians, who had been on a visit to St. Louis. These "Lords of the Soil" trod the deck with a conscious air of freedom and independence, and looked with longing eyes toward the shores, as if they were already wearied of even the few restraints of the rough civilisation with which they were surrounded. Quite naturally it was the Indians that aroused the greatest interest in Mildred and the boys.

"That tall Indian with the eagle feathers in his hair must be a chief," Arthur whispered to Ray and Mildred, as they stood a few feet away watching the Indians with interested eyes; "and he's the best-looking Indian I ever saw, so tall and straight, and he don't look ugly and cruel."

"Wall, didn't you three kids ever see a real live Injun afore?" inquired a deep rough voice so close behind the children that all three jumped and turned quickly around and stared in surprise and not a little fear at the great shaggy-bearded man, dressed in the rough garb of a hunter, who had spoken to them, and who now stood with his legs set wide apart looking down at them out of a pair of bloodshot eyes set in a red, brutal-looking face. Even the inexperienced eyes of the children could see that the man had been drinking too much whisky and was in an ugly temper.

"If you knowed Injuns as well as I do," continued the hunter, the ugly look on his face deepening, "th'

less you seen of them th' better you'd like it. They're worser than 'phoby cats an' pisen snakes. The only good Injun I ever seed was a dead Injun. Now, that particular rattlesnake there," and he pointed a finger directly at the tall chief, " would sooner lift th' hair off that gal's head than eat dog meat, which is pie in Injun."

Mildred shivered and caught hold of Ray's arm.

" Scart, be you? " and the man laughed loudly. Then a new idea came into his drunken head. " Want to see that Injun dance? 'Course you do," and without waiting for an answer, he strode up to the tall Indian chief. " Here, you red son of a thousand devils, get up an' shake them lazy bones of yourn. Give us a war-dance, an' give it quick, or I'll knock your nose through th' back of your head," and he shook a huge red fist, nearly as big as a ham, in front of the chief's face.

The tall form of the Indian stiffened, and his lips tightened across his teeth, and he stared straight into the bleered eyes of the burly hunter for a second; and then, with a gesture of utter contempt, he calmly folded his arms on his bosom and turned his back squarely to the hunter.

For an instant the drunken bully stared blankly at the back of the Indian's head; and then, as the significance of the chief's action burst on his muddled faculties, his face went red, and with a fearful oath he swung back his right leg and gave the Indian a terrific kick with his heavy boot. The hunter was almost a giant in size, and exceedingly muscular, and the chief was lifted off his feet as if he had been struck by a battering ram, and hurled against the deck railing with so much force that the railing broke, and the Indian

plunged headlong over into the muddy waters of the Missouri.

Mildred screamed, and a cry of horror went up from many lips, for all saw that the Indian had struck his head against the railing and was insensible when he went overboard.

"He'll drown! He's hurt!" shouted Ray, and jerking off his coat, he rushed to the side of the boat and leaped after the Indian; and not a half a second behind him plunged Arthur.

The current of the Missouri is very swift and its water opaque with mud; and when Ray and Arthur came to the surface after their plunge, they were already a rod or more from the steamboat, and the Indian chief was nowhere in sight. He had sunk like a log the moment he struck the water; but, unlike a log, he had not risen at once to the surface, and it was impossible for the boys to see a foot into the muddy water. For a minute they swam about desperately, straining their eyes for a glimpse of the drowning man; and then both boys caught sight of the body of the Indian floating helplessly in the water about a rod farther down the river. At the same moment a shout from the steamer, which had stopped and was lowering a boat, told them that help was coming speedily. In a minute the boys had hold of the Indian, and were supporting his head above the water, and in five minutes more the insensible chief and his two rescuers were lifted out of the water into the boat and hurried to the deck of the steamer, where Ray and Arthur, to their very evident embarrassment, found themselves the heroes of the moment.

"Good thing for that Indian that you boys know

how to swim, and have got sense enough to act at once," Mr. Judson said, slapping both boys heartily on the shoulders. "That's the great thing—to know what to do and to do it at once. Now, skedaddle for the waggon, and get into some dry clothes— Oh, they're all right. Sound as a dollar, and not a picayune the worse for their wetting." This to Mildred, who had come running up, her face white and wet with tears, just as the boys hurried away to the waggon. "Now, let's see how our Indian friend is coming on," and taking Mildred by the hand, he hastened to where a crowd had gathered around the insensible chief.

Fortunately the Indian chief had swallowed but little water, and was soon restored to consciousness. The hurt on his head, while it had deprived him of his senses for a short time, was not at all serious, and a couple of days would find him a sound Indian again.

By the time Ray and Arthur returned in their dry clothes the chief was sitting up, and had heard the story of his rescue with seeming indifference; but the moment his eyes caught sight of the two boys, his stolid face lighted up, and he motioned them to approach, rising to his feet to receive them with that native dignity that seems to be a natural inheritance of all these kings of the plains and forests. For a full two minutes after Ray and Arthur stood in front of him, the Indian's piercing black eyes studied their forms and features intently, as if he were trying to print their photographs indelibly on his memory; then he took Ray's right hand and placed it over his heart. "Leaping Beaver brave," he said, giving Ray a name suggested by his late exploit, after the manner of Indians. "Eagle Feather drown, Leaping Beaver no save. Eagle Feather chief, he no

forget. Eagle Feather brother Leaping Beaver. Leaping Beaver need Eagle Feather, send. Eagle Feather come." Again the chief stood silent and looked intently into Ray's face for a moment; then releasing Ray's hand, he turned to Arthur, and placing the boy's right palm over his heart, went through exactly the same formula he had with Ray, giving Arthur the name of White Otter.

Only the quiet dignity and absolute unaffectedness and sincerity of the chief saved this scene from appearing theatrical. The deck was crowded with interested onlookers, but Eagle Feather took no notice of their presence, and proceeded to show his gratitude exactly as he would have done had he been alone on his native plains with the two boys.

"Oh, that was nothing," Ray answered the moment the chief dropped Arthur's hand. "We have jumped into the water from a higher point than that lots of times just for fun, haven't we, Art?"

"Of course we have," responded Arthur, as if the height of the dive had been the main thing. "That wasn't much of a dive. Why, the bridge across the North Creek must be a good ten feet higher, and we've dove from there hundreds of times. Of course we're glad we got to you in time to keep your mouth out of the water until the boat came; but that wasn't anything. Any good swimmer could have done that; and you were hurt. Where's that big man that kicked you overboard?" and Arthur's face flushed and his eyes sparkled indignantly as he glanced over the crowd surrounding them. "I'd like to tell him what a brute I think him."

"Eagle Feather no forget white hunter." The eyes

of the chief flamed and his right hand clenched itself so tightly that the knuckles showed white as he spoke, and he glanced swiftly around at the surrounding faces, but the red, brutal face of the hunter was not within sight.

Two or three of the hunter's companions had got hold of him the moment after he had kicked the Indian, and during the confusion attending the chief's rescue, had managed to get him away into a secluded corner of the boat, where they plied him with "drinks" so successfully that he was soon sprawled out on the floor in the stupor of a drunken sleep. This, under the circumstances, was considered the safest thing to do; for Grizzly Ike, the hunter, when in liquor, was as ugly and as ferocious and about as dangerous as his savage namesake, and drunk or sober, feared neither man, God, nor devil. He belonged to that hardy, reckless, fearless class of men, who spent the greater part of their lives hunting and trapping through the vast wildernesses and rocky fastnesses of the then unexplored mountains and plains of the great West, his only protector his rifle, his only friends and comrades his packhorses, and his most implacable and deadly enemy the ever cruel and crafty Indian, against whose virulent enmity he was compelled to guard himself night and day.

This manner of life bred a fierce independence of spirit that often degenerated into brutality and cruelty, as in the case of Grizzly Ike; but by far the greater number of these trappers and hunters were men of an heroic type, whose courage, fortitude, and perseverance are unequalled in the annals of any nation; and to whom we, who are reaping where they sowed, owe

more than words can tell. They were the real explorers, the pathfinders, the pioneers of our great West; and when the history of that West is adequately written that is the place these men will occupy on its pages.

While the interesting scene just described had been passing between Ray and Arthur and the Indian chief, Mildred had been gradually drawing nearer and nearer to where they stood, pulling her smiling father along after her by his hand, and keeping her eyes fixed on the face of the Indian, ready to spring away at the first sign of hostility on his part. She now stood within hand-reach of Ray, her face dimpling and smiling and her eyes sparkling with excitement and interest; for this was the first time that she had ever stood so near to a real live Indian chief, and it was an important moment in her young life.

Eagle Feather saw her, and his stern face relaxed into a smile as his eyes rested on her dimpling cheeks. "How do, white papoose, with face like water dancing in sun—Smiling Waters," and he extended his hand for Mildred to shake.

Mildred glanced up at her father, who nodded, looked up into the chief's smiling face, and without a moment's more hesitation, took his hand; and all her fear of the dread Indian chief vanished with that handshake, and she began talking to him with the innocence and freedom that makes childhood so charming.

That night when Ray and Arthur entered the waggon to go to bed, for they slept beneath its white cover while the waggon was on the boat to protect its contents from possible robbers during the hours of darkness, they had much to talk over all by themselves. It had been a great day for them. They had saved the life

of a great Indian chief, had been made his brothers, and with Mildred by their sides, had sat for hours listening while their red brother and his comrades had told them, in their broken English, wild tales of Indian life. Now, all boys will understand that all this could not happen to two boys in one day without giving them a vast deal to talk over the very first time they got by themselves; and all boys I am sure will commend the author for leaving them undisturbed under the white cover of the waggon to chat about these exciting events in that intimate, chummy way so dear to every boy, until sleep finally closed their eyes and silenced their tongues.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DISCOMFITURE OF GRIZZLY IKE

THE next morning Ray and Arthur were standing on the hurricane deck of the steamboat watching the shores slipping slowly by, when they were greeted from behind by a voice, a queer, gruff voice that sounded like a woman or girl trying to talk with her mouth full of chestnut burs.

"How do, Leaping Beaver. How do, White Otter," the queer voice said.

Ray and Arthur whirled around and saw Mildred attempting to regard them with the stern gravity of an Indian, but she was not succeeding very well, for her eyes were dancing and her cheeks were beginning to dimple.

"How do, Smiling Waters," gravely responded Ray and Arthur in the same breath. "Heap fine morning, white papoose, with face like water dancing in the sun," added Arthur, and then the three children broke into merry laughter, which was speedily checked by Ray suddenly exclaiming: "Look over there by that clump of trees! See, it's an emigrant train camped out, and they're just getting ready to break camp. My but it must be fun to live like that!"

"Look, look, there are women and children!" cried Mildred. "Won't it be romantic and jolly to live like

that? and sleep in a tent or waggon? and cook over a camp-fire? and travel on and on and on over the beautiful prairies and great plains? 'Twill be like going on a picnic every day. Oh, see, they're shouting and waving their hats and handkerchiefs to us!"

"Let's give them a cheer—a California cheer!" exclaimed Arthur, grabbing off his hat and waving it around his head. "Hurrah, hurrah for the gold mines of California! Hip—hip—Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" From the sound it seemed as if everybody on board had joined in the cheering; but clear and distinct above all rose the voices of the children, vibrant with the joy and the enthusiasm of youth.

This was the first emigrant train that Mildred and the boys had seen; and in the bright warm light of the early morning the little camp of tents and covered waggons crowning a little hill on the banks of the river, with a little grove of trees on one side and the seemingly boundless green of the prairie on the other, the men, women, and children hurrying hither and thither, fastening the oxen and the horses to the waggons, taking down the tents, and preparing to begin the day's journey, presented a rarely picturesque and romantic scene of bustling activity that appealed strongly to the vivid imaginations of the three children. They stood and watched the little band of emigrants as long as they could see a waving hat or handkerchief, and when the last white-topped waggon had vanished and they turned away, Mildred said, with just a touch of sadness in her voice: "Why, I almost feel as if I had been waving good-byes to friends." During the remainder of the journey to Independence they often saw the waggons of the emigrants sometimes camped on the

banks of the river, but more often moving in a long line slowly over the great prairies, and always headed westward toward the golden Eldorado; and with the sight of each fresh contingent of emigrants their longing increased for the time to come when their waggon would be numbered among the long line of waggons stretching out like a thin white ribbon across the great plains and over the mountains to the far-off gold mines of California.

"I want to see Eagle Feather," Mildred said shortly after the camp of the emigrants had passed from view, "and find out how he is feeling this morning. I am sure his head must hurt awful. It had a lump on it as big as an egg where it hit the railing when that— Sh-h-h! there he comes now!" and Mildred pointed excitedly to where the bulky form of Grizzly Ike came in sight at the other end of the deck, and strode toward them, accompanied by a couple of his friends. "I hate him!" and Mildred's eyes flashed wrathfully. "He ought to be put in jail for hurting Eagle Feather just because he's an Indian. I shan't run, even if I am afraid of him," and Mildred threw back her head and straightened up her plump body, and looked defiantly toward the approaching hunters.

"My, but he is a whopper!" Ray exclaimed. "He must be even bigger than Tom Rawlins, and he's as ugly looking as sin. Wonder if he'll remember us?"

The appearance of Grizzly Ike certainly justified the comments of Ray. He was an enormous man, nearly six feet and a half tall, with a round, bullet-like head set on a bull-like neck and shoulders, whose great breadth and massive depth of chest gave abundant tokens of those tremendous physical powers that had

won for him the name of Grizzly Ike. His hair and beard evidently had long been unacquainted with comb or scissors; and his red face, with its retreating forehead, thick lips, projecting chin, and small eyes, had more of the craftiness and brutality of a cunning animal in it than it did of the kindliness and chivalry of true manhood. His coat and trousers were of tanned deerskin, with heavy fringes hanging from their seams, a broad belt, which held a long knife and a heavy pistol, circled his waist, his powder-flask and bullet-pouch hung under his arm, and he carried his long, heavy-barrelled rifle in his right hand. He was what was known as a "mountain man," a wild and fearless class of hunters who loaded up a pack-horse or two with supplies, mounted their horses, and wandered, often for months and frequently absolutely alone, through the deep recesses of the wild and unexplored fastnesses of the mountains, in pursuit of the fur-bearing animals whose valuable skins furnished them with the means of procuring the few things they asked of civilisation.

No wonder that to the eyes of Ray the huge, uncouth man who was approaching looked as "ugly as sin," and that Mildred feared and hated him.

Grizzly Ike paused in front of Mildred and the boys.

"How do," he said gruffly. "Fine mornin'. Whar's yer Injun friends? I heered how you pulled that snake out of th' river. I likes pluck, an' you was plucky; but you did a fool thing when you saved th' Big Muddy th' trouble of swallowin' that vermin. When you comes to know Injuns better you'll feel 'bout as friendly to them as to rattlesnakes an' 'phoby cats. They hain't

humans, an' they hain't animals, an' if hell's got any bigger devils then I don't want to go thar. I've knowed Injuns since I was knee high to a hop toad—lived with 'em, fit 'em, killed 'em, an' been nigh killed by 'em—an' I knows what I'm talkin', an' when I says th' only good Injun is a dead Injun I means it hard an' straight. I——"

But Mildred had been growing angrier every moment the man was uttering this diatribe, and now came the explosion of her pent-up wrath.

"I think you are the meanest, wickedest, ugliest, hatefulest, cruelest, awfulest man I ever saw," she cried, her cheeks white but her eyes aflame; "and you ought to be put in jail and fed on bread and water ever and ever so long for hurting Eagle Feather, just 'cause he is an Indian. If I were a man as big and strong as you are, I'd be ashamed to do such a mean, cruel, wicked, cowardly, brutal thing," and she took a step toward Grizzly Ike, and stamped her little foot violently on the deck.

Grizzly Ike stared at Mildred in blank astonishment. He knew about as much about girls as he did about angels; and to have one of them stand up in front of him and give him a tongue lashing that would have meant sudden death to any man that uttered it was so preposterously astounding that the man was actually frightened; and when Mildred took a step toward him and stamped her little foot, he jumped back, and continued to back off, his eyes fixed on the angry girl's face and his mouth agape, until he had placed the length of the deck between him and her, where he stopped and stood, still blankly staring at the girl, hardly larger than one of his great fists, who had

dared to brave the wrath of Grizzly Ike, the terror of the Rocky Mountains.

"Bully for you, Dimples! That was great!" and Jedidiah Judson stepped out from behind a near-by pile of goods, where he had heard and witnessed the whole scene between Grizzly Ike and Mildred. "Don't believe there's a man west, or east, for that matter, of the Big Muddy that would have dared say them words to Grizzly Ike, unless he was wanting to commit sudden suicide mighty bad. Great Scott! I never saw anybody look so astounded and dumfounded as Grizzly Ike did when you braced up to him and began firing away. It was great!—Hi ho! What now?"

Mildred for a minute had stood glaring after Grizzly Ike, and then suddenly burst into tears and threw herself into her father's arms.

"Women are queer," explained Mr. Judson, as he comforted Mildred, "blamed queer. They'll do a brave thing that would scare the teeth right out of a man's mouth, and then when it's all over and there's no need to be scared any longer, they'll throw a faint, or turn loose a cyclone of sobs and tears, or something, just to show that they are women, I reckon."

Ray and Arthur joined heartily in the comforting process, and Mildred was soon her merry laughing self again, and started off with the boys for the lower deck where the Indians were encamped.

Grizzly Ike, during the remainder of the steamboat journey, shunned the children; but they often saw him standing at a distance and regarding Mildred with a look of mingled awe and wonder on his face. If they moved toward him he vanished. Evidently Mildred had so completely vanquished him in that famous

encounter on the deck that he did not have enough courage left to venture another contest, and was satisfied to keep his distance, and the children were satisfied to let him.

Eagle Feather and his braves received Mildred and the boys with broad smiles of welcome, and at once made a place for them in the little circle where they sat on their blankets.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred were very anxious to learn all they could concerning Indians, for, as Ray said, "It might come in handy sometime when they were out on the plains to know things about Indians"; and so they never tired of asking Eagle Feather and his companions questions, and of listening to their replies and to the stories they told of the wild life lived by the red men.

Eagle Feather and his warriors belonged to the Delaware tribe of Indians, once the peaceful allies of William Penn, but now the most adventurous and dreaded Indians of the Western plains and mountains. Their little war-parties roamed in search of plunder or vengeance as far west as the Rocky Mountains, and south their war-whoop was heard and feared far into the territories of Mexico. Eagle Feather was as proud of his nation, of his ancestors, as ever was Roman general of the great deeds of Rome; and once the hard wall of his natural reserve overthrown, he gloried in relating to Mildred and the boys the stories and legends of the great men of his tribe, and in telling them of their customs and religion handed down through unknown generations. He and his companions had been to St. Louis on a short visit, where they had seen the "sights," and now were anxious to get back to their

native plains, away from the " heap big lodges " of the white men, where they could breathe the free air of the great prairies.

During the remainder of the voyage up the river Mildred and the boys passed many pleasant hours in the company of their red friends; and, when at last the boat tied up at Independence Landing early on the morning of the seventh day from St. Louis, they bade farewell to Eagle Feather and his braves with real sorrow and with many wishes that they might meet again. Alas, it was well that none of them could foresee under what dramatic circumstances of deadly peril that meeting, so ardently longed for, was to take place!

Eagle Feather, before saying his good-byes, gave Mildred a beautiful pair of beaded moccasins, and hung around the neck of each of the boys a small eagle, the totem of his family, rudely carved out of red pipestone, and fastened to a stout thong of buckskin by a hole through its centre. He cautioned the boys never to part with the totem; told them that it would bring them good luck so long as they wore it, and that every Delaware Indian was sworn to protect its wearer. He then gravely shook hands with all, again calling Ray and Arthur his brothers, and followed by his braves in single file, stalked slowly away toward the West, and passed from the sight of the little group of white, who stood on the shore of the river watching his departure, without one backward glance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"STOP, THIEF, STOP!"

IF you look on your maps you can still find the little town of Independence, situated not far from the western boundary of Missouri, near where the Missouri River makes a northward turn, and within a few miles of its giant sister, Kansas City. It is now a quiet, unimportant town, great only in its history; but at the time of which I write it was one of the busiest and most important places on our Western frontier, the rendezvous of the thousands of emigrants bound for the gold mines of California and the forests of Oregon, of Santa Fé traders, and of trappers, hunters, traders, and Indians from all parts of the West. Here the waggon-trains procured their final supplies, and here the emigrants had their last look at civilised life for many weary weeks. In the picturesque language of the time it was the "jumping-off place," the *Ultima Thule* of civilisation. Not again until the Mormon city on Great Salt Lake was reached would the California emigrant see a house, or a cultivated field, or any other sign of civilised human life, except at one or two lonely frontier forts, after the last rough dwelling-place in Independence had passed from sight; and Salt Lake City was nearly fifteen hundred miles away! and all this great distance must be traversed with slow-moving

oxen and horses over roadless plains and mountains! No wonder the poor emigrant thought of it as the "jumping-off place."

On the morning when our friends disembarked at Independence Landing, the town is some two or three miles from the river, they at once became a part of a scene of great bustle and excitement. Other steamboats were loading and unloading their passengers and goods. Across the river ferries were constantly carrying fresh arrivals of emigrants, with their live stock and waggons. Men were shouting, waggon-wheels creaking, oxen lowing, mules braying, dogs barking, chains rattling, boxes thumping against boxes as they were unloaded from the boats—rush and confusion everywhere. The waves of gold-seekers were rolling in from every direction and from all parts of the nation, and breaking into a confused jumble of men, women, children, horses, oxen, mules, dogs, and waggons at this spot. But at last, near the middle of the afternoon, Jedidiah Judson and the two boys succeeded in extricating their waggon and goods from all this confusion and in getting them to a little open space some distance away from the hurly-burly.

"Blamed if this don't beat anything I ever saw," and Jedidiah Judson sat down on the waggon-tongue and stared at the exciting scenes passing around him. "Every darned fool in the United States must have gone gold mad and started for California. Now just look at that man with the woman and three little children and scrawny yoke of oxen and old weather-beaten waggon," and he pointed to an outfit that had just crossed the Missouri and was now slowly making its way in their direction. "They look plumb played

out already, and the journey hardly begun. Reckon they've wheeled it all the way from 'tother side of the Mississippi. How they ever expect to reach California with that outfit is more'n my comprehension can comprehend. Them oxen won't last a fortnight out on the plains. And there's the woman and children! Suffering Pharaoh, what idiots some men be!"

"See, the poor woman has got a little baby in her arms!" exclaimed Mildred, her voice full of sympathy.

"Blamed if she ain't," admitted Mr. Judson in great disgust. "That makes four little ones, and the oldest not over ten years! The man ought to be hanged and tarred and feathered and drawn and quartered for bringing the woman and the little ones on such a journey. 'Tain't only senseless—it's cruelty to human beings. But there you be! Nobody can do a thing!—Hello! Reckon we're to have them for neighbours for a spell." As he spoke the man stopped his oxen not a dozen rods away, and began unyoking them, while the woman handed the baby to the oldest child, climbed listlessly out of the waggon, and stood staring in the direction of Jedidiah Judson and his little party.

Mrs. Judson's motherly heart was touched by the sight of the lonely woman with the four little children. "I'm going right over to see if we can't be of some help to them, Jed," she said. "They look as if they were half starved, and that baby's crying goes right to my heart. Sounds as if the poor little thing was sick," and the good woman began at once getting together a few "little things" to take with her on her neighbourly call.

"I reckon you'd better, Cat." Mrs. Judson's given name was Katherine, but her husband usually called her

"Cat," "because," as he explained, "life is too short to say Katherine to your wife every time you want to speak to her, and Cat's a plumb good fit anyhow, for she's as loving and gentle and purring as a kitten until she unsheathes her claws, and then—" and the look on his face finished the sentence. "I reckon you'd better, Cat," and Mr. Judson's eyes twinkled. "'Twouldn't be polite if you didn't make the first call, seeing that we were here first; but if you save your manners you'll have to hustle, for by the look on that woman's face she's feeling impelled to shame you by calling first. That baby is a yelling some colicy. Poor little tike! Now who'd think any father or mother would have the heart to take such a little thing on such a journey? Blamed if I can understand the foolishness of some humans!— Well, what is it, Dimples?" and he threw one arm around Mildred, who had come up to him while he was speaking, and drew her to him. "I'll bet a cookie against a farm that you're figuring on euchring your old dad out of something. I can see it in your eyes. Out with it," and he gave her right cheek a wee pinch, by way of showing what a ferocious parent he was.

"Well, you're wrong, dad," Mildred laughed. "I don't want anything from you this time. I only want to give," and she glanced up appealingly into her father's eyes. "I only want to give that poor girl my red dress. Mamma says I can, if you don't care; and you know the dress is old, and I am getting so big that it's short for me, but it's lots better than the dress the poor girl has on. Why," and Mildred's face showed her horror, "her dress is all full of holes! I can see them clear from here. I can give her the dress, can't I,

dad?" and she put an arm around his neck and pulled his head down until his rough, bearded face pressed against her soft, warm cheek.

"Of course you can give that poor girl your red dress," Mr. Judson replied, and then continued soberly: "And maybe you'd better take my Sunday-go-to-meeting suit of clothes to that poor man, I can see his knees sticking out clean from here, and your ma's black alpaca dress to that poor woman, her'n ain't fit to hang on a scarecrow; and—" But here he caught sight of Mildred's astonished face, and burst into a hearty laugh.

In an instant Mildred saw through the joke. "All right for you, Papa Judson," she cried merrily. "But you said I could give the girl the dress, and that was all I wanted. Good-bye," and with a rousing smack on her father's cheek, she ran to join her mother.

"Now, boys," and Mr. Judson turned to Ray and Arthur, who had just returned with the very last bit of baggage from the steamboat, "I am going to leave you on guard while I strike out after a couple of yoke of oxen. I hear there's a man over by the ferry that's got just about the kind of critters I want, and I am anxious to buy them at once, so that they can haul us over to Independence in time for us to get comfortably settled in camp before dark. Mildred and her mother are going calling," and he chuckled and glanced in the direction of the weather-beaten waggon and its dilapidated occupants, "so you'll be alone. Don't let anybody go poking around the waggon. There's plenty of sheriff's meat in that crowd over yonder, unless my intellect misses fire, and we've got to be our own doors and locks from now on."

"Oh, we'll keep good watch, never fear," Arthur declared a little boastfully. "And you'll find the doors and locks unbroken when you get back," he added with a laugh.

"Reckon I will," Mr. Judson answered smiling. "But I thought it best to give you a warning. So-long everybody. I'll be back as soon as I can get the cattle," and Jedidiah Judson started off in the direction of the ferry, leaving Ray and Arthur alone, for Mildred and her mother were by this time on their way to make their call.

The arrival of the Judson party with their spick and span new waggon and its costly load of goods had not passed unnoticed through the crowded landing place. Many an envious eye had followed the waggon to its stopping place, a half a mile or more from the river's shore, and at least two pairs of eyes had kept close watch of it and its occupants ever since. Now, when these two pairs of eyes saw Mr. Judson walking rapidly away from the waggon, leaving two young boys in sole charge, they exchanged looks of intelligence.

"Now's our chance, Bob," said the owner of the pair of black eyes and shaggy black hair and beard, laying one hand on the shoulder of the owner of the pair of blue eyes with the great scar disfiguring the nose and left cheek, and speaking hardly above a whisper. "We'll jest amble out tew th' waggin kindy neighbourly like, an' get up a talk with them tew kids 'bout Californe, an' how we've jest came from thar, an' how we's goin' back tew our old home in th' East, rich as tew Cresuses with bags an' bags full of gold-dust; an' after we've got them tew kids' eyes bulgin' with yarns of th' fab'lous wealth tew be picked up in

Californe, I'll, polite-like, offer tew go an' get some of our gold nuggets, jest tew show th' kids what th' stuff looks like, an' off I'll start, while you starts tew tellin' th' darndest thrillin'est yarn you can think of, so as tew keep th' kids tew interested tew notice what's goin' on, an' then I'll sneak intew th' waggin, an' light out with hands an' pockets full. If th' kids get onto th' racket, punch 'em, an' run for th' crowd. A hundred tew one we can git safely away afore th' youngsters gits thar wits back sufficient tew do anything but yell. Is it a go, Bob?"

"Sure, Mike; but ain't you th' rum one when it comes tew plannin'?" responded Bob, with hearty approval and admiration. "Now I reckon we'd better be amblin', so as to git safe away afore that long-legged gent gits back. Come on, an' look your innocentest, Mike, an' we'll fool them kids worser than a cage of monkeys."

When our two unworthy friends reached the waggon they found Ray and Arthur on the ground a little to one side of the waggon. Arthur was reading aloud the latest California news from a paper, and Ray was stretched out on his back listening to him. Neither saw nor heard the two men until Mike spoke.

"Howdy, boys," that worthy began, smiling, and rubbing his hands together in front of him. "Takin' it comfortable an' easy-like, I see, an' a-readin' of th' papers all 'bout th' gold minin' in Californe. Most wonderful mines in th' world! Nothin' like 'em since th' days of Solomon an' Sheba! Gold! Why," and he spread out both of his hands to make his words more impressive, "th' newspapers don't tell half th' truth, 'cause them that's thar don't want th' rest of th' world

to know or every mother's son of 'em from China tew Parue would be a-leggin' it for Californe. Now me an' my pardner, Bob Simmons, him that's standin' thar aside of me, knows. We've jest come from thar, from th' gold mines, an'," he lowered his voice, "I don't mind tellin' you, confidential-like, that we've made our pile an' made it big, an' now we're goin' back tew our old homes in Vermont tew make th' old folks happy an' tew take life easy, me an' Bob are. Right, Bob?"

"Right as preachin'," answered Bob. "Never seed such a country for gold as Californe is. Pick it up in hunks right off th' ground, same as we could hickory nuts back in Vermont. Be you folks goin' tew Californe? Because if you be, me an' Mike, seein' we've been thar, might give you a point or tew."

Ray and Arthur at first had been considerably startled by the sudden appearance of the two men, and more than a little suspicious; for they were roughly dressed, unkempt, and dirty, and looked, in the expressive and implicit language of slang, like two bums; but the moment they spoke of having just returned from the magic land of California, laden with untold wealth from its wonderful mines, all their suspicions were forgotten, and their eyes fairly devoured Mike and Bob in the intensity of their interest to see two men who had actually been to California and dug up its gold, much as they had been accustomed to dig up potatoes, and were returning to their Eastern homes to live forever afterward in ease and luxury. No wonder men who had had such an experience looked rough and unkempt.

"Yes, we are going to California," Arthur answered, his voice trembling with suppressed excitement

and eagerness; "and—and we would think it awfully good of you if you would tell us something about its wonderful gold mines. You are the first gold miners from California we have ever seen. Won't you sit down, please, and tell us all about the gold mines? Do they really find gold nuggets as big as hickory nuts lying right on top of the ground?" and the eyes of both the boys fixed themselves on the faces of the two men, fascinated with interest.

"Sure we'll set down, bein' that you're so sociable-like an' friendly," and Bob squatted down on the ground by the side of the boys. "Do they find gold nuggets as big as hickory nuts in Californe? As big as hickory nuts! Did you hear that, Mike? As big as hickory nuts! Why, me an' Mike— But did you kids ever see a gold nugget, a real virgin gold nugget, jest as it was picked up from th' ground?"

"No-o-o," responded both boys, their eyes aflame with interest.

"Did you hear that, Mike? Never seed a gold nugget! Such ignerence! 'Cuse me, but tew me an' Mike, jest from Californe, tew find a person who'd never seed a gold nugget seems as astoundin' as 'twould be tew find a man who'd never seed a pertatoe. Never seed a gold nugget! Now, Mike, you hike right over tew our camp an' bring back a hatful of nuggets, an' we'll give th' kids a chance tew see th' real stuff jest as we picked it off th' top of th' earth."

"Oh, if you would!" exclaimed Ray, his eyes shining. "But won't it be too much trouble? I——"

"Trouble?" broke in Mike indignantly. "I reckon you don't know me an' Bob. We never stops for trouble when we's 'commodatin' friends. 'Course I'll go, an'

be back right smart with nuggets enough tew fill a milk pail. So-long," and he started off on a rapid walk.

"Nuggets, do they find nuggets as big as hickory nuts in Californe, you ask? Why, as I was sayin'," and Bob brought his fist down on the ground with a whack that instantly riveted the attention of the two boys on him, and enabled the dexterous Mike to slip into the covered waggon unseen by their eyes. "Why, as I was sayin', me an' Mike on a Sunday afternoon was a-strollin' up one of these here Californe gulches, not a-thinkin' of gold an' jest a-talkin' sociable-like, when I ups an' stubs my toe on a rock an' went, ger-whallop, headfust down intew a chasm 'bout a mile deep, but I got only 'bout ten feet down when my head bumps on a narrer ledge of rocks an' I stuck thar, knocked senseless but without much damage done.

"When I comes tew, th' fust thing I heered was Mike hollerin': 'Don't move, for th' love of hiven, don't move, Bob, or you'll knock it off!' I looks up an' thar was Mike, white of face an' a-starin' down wild-like, an' a-stretchin' down his tew arms an' implorin' of me not tew move or I'd knock it off; an' then I seed somethin' right by my side an' within an inch of th' edge of th' narrer ledge of rocks on which I was a-lyin', that made my blood jump like race horses. 'Twas a round yeller chunk of pure virgin gold as big as——"

But Bob never stopped to tell how big that "round yeller chunk of pure virgin gold" was, for at that instant a crash of falling tinware, followed by an oath and a ripping sound of tearing cloth, coming from within the covered waggon, told him that Mike had come to grief and that it was time for him to light out.

He jumped to his feet just as the startled boys leaped to theirs, and then, before either of the lads had the least idea of what was happening, he struck out with both fists, knocking Ray and Arthur flat on their backs, and ran for the crowded landing where in three minutes he was swallowed up in the hurrying throngs.

In the meantime Mike was passing through a scene of even greater excitement. The instant the tin pail fell he knew that the game was up and that it behooved him to get away from there as quickly as his legs could take him. He jerked out his knife, ripped open the canvas cover of the waggon on the side opposite to the boys, jumped to the ground, and started, with pockets and hands loaded with plunder, for the crowded steamboat landing. But he had reckoned without accounting for our dilapidated friend of the weather-beaten waggon and scrawny oxen, who at that precise instant was leaning listlessly against the tail end of his waggon, his eyes fixed on the clean white cover and glistening paint of his neighbour's new waggon. As the form of Mike shot out through the side of the waggon cover our dilapidated friend straightened up with a jerk, thrust his right arm quickly into his waggon, and pulled out an old long-barrelled rifle which he instantly threw to his shoulder.

"Stop, thief, stop!" he yelled.

But Mike only ran the faster, dropping a bundle of clothes that retarded his speed, while the violence of his exertions forced various odds and ends that he had appropriated out of his stuffed pockets, leaving a wake of stolen goods behind him.

"Stop, gol-dang ye! Stop!"

Still Mike's legs flew.

"Shoot, Jud!" yelled the woman. "Shoot, he's a-thievin'!"

"Reckon I'd better," and Jud shot.

With a wild yell Mike clapped both hands to his head, his hat had been knocked flying, and plunged headlong to the ground.

"Reckon I'd better see what he's got in them pockets, Meranda, afore he comes tew his right senses," and Jud, holding his rifle in his right hand, started on the run to where Mike lay groaning and swearing and kicking. The moment he reached the prostrate man, he gripped him by the shoulders and yanked him to his feet. "Now stand thar, concern ye, an' unload!" he cried, stepping back quickly and throwing his rifle to his shoulder and levelling it straight at Mike's head.

"I'm shot! I'm killed!" shrieked Mike, as a little stream of blood trickled down from between his fingers. "I'm killed! I'm dead!"

"Shut up, an' unload, quick!" snapped Jud, his eye flaming along the top of his rifle barrel. "Danged quick, or my next shot'll kill you dead."

Mike saw the rifle barrel, saw the eye flaming above it and the stern face behind it; and his wild yells died in choking gurgles in his throat and his hands dropped limply to his sides and his face whitened until the little stream of blood trickling down his cheek looked like a streak of red ink on a bit of white paper. "Do-o-don't shoot!" he gasped.

"Unload them pockets," commanded Jud.

With shaking hands Mike began emptying his pockets, his eyes fixed in a fascination of horror on the little round hole in the muzzle of Jud's rifle, and

his trembling tongue stammering over and over: "Do-on't, do-do-on't sho-o-ot."

"Now git!" ordered Jud, when the last pocket hung limp and empty inside out. "An' git so fast an' far that ha'r nor hide of ye can be found in these parts at th' end of an hour. Git!" and suddenly lowering his rifle, he sprang behind Mike and started him on his way with a kick that nearly lifted him off his feet.

Mike, with a jump like that of a jack-rabbit, was off; and in a couple of minutes the hurly-burly of the crowded landing had swallowed up his flying form.

At this moment Ray and Arthur rushed around the end of the waggon, and in the utmost excitement ran to where Jud stood leaning on his rifle and chuckling to himself.

"What—what has happened?" panted Ray.

"Who—who's shot?" cried Arthur.

"Thieves," answered Jud, pointing to the trail of scattered goods ending in the little pile where Mike had stood, and to the slit waggon cover, "jest ornery thieves, but I reckon they didn't git nothin'. Leastwise I made one on 'em unload. Held th' danged idjit up with an empty gun," and Jud chuckled.

An hour later when Jedidiah Judson returned driving before him two yoke of oxen, he found an excited group gathered in front of his waggon, half surrounding Ray and Arthur, who sat on the waggon-tongue, while Mildred and her mother occupied the driver's seat. The boys were heartily disgusted with the part they had played in the attempted robbery, and exceedingly anxious to get rid of the crowd, who persisted in staring at them and asking fool questions, after the manner of crowds the world over.

"What's all this pow-wow about?" and Mr. Judson elbowed his way hastily through the crowd to where Ray and Arthur sat, his face white with anxiety.

In as few words as possible Arthur told him what had happened, and before he was through Mr. Judson's eyes were twinkling and his lips twitching. He remembered very distinctly Arthur's boastful words: "You'll find the doors and locks unbroken when you get back."

"'Pears to me," he said, grinning broadly and glancing at Ray's swollen nose and Arthur's black eye, mementos of the hardness of Bob's fists, "that the doors and locks must have given the robbers considerable trouble, judging from the color of Art's eye and the size of Ray's nose. Well, you got fooled good that time, youngsters, but I reckon 'twill take a sharper pair than them two rascals to play that game on you again. Neighbour," and he turned to Jud, who stood leaning listlessly against one of the front wheels of the waggon, his rifle still in his hand, "you did us a mighty good turn in a mighty prompt and effective way. Here's my hand. Jedidiah Judson's got a good memory," and he gripped the hand of the man and shook it warmly.

"'Twasn't nothin'," responded Jud. "Jest a lettle 'musement tew liven things up a bit. More fun than Jud Jimpson an' his old rifle's had afore for a month of Sundays. Now I reckon I'd better be a gettin' back tew Meranda an' th' yunks, seein' that you is back. Thank you kindly, madam," and he jerked off his wide-brimmed hat and turned to Mrs. Judson and Mildred, "for a-comin' over so neighbourly like, you an' th' lettle gal. 'Twas mighty good of you. Th' old woman's plumb tuckered out, an' th' baby's sort of ailin' an'

fretful, an' th' oxen's that petered seems like they couldn't pull th' old waggon another rod; but I reckon a few days' rest'll put us all on our mettle ag'in. Be you bound for Californy, neighbour?"

Mr. Judson answered him in the affirmative.

"So is me an' th' old woman an' th' yunks, an' we's all a-calculatin' on comin' back tew our old home in Illinoy a-rollin' in gold," and Jud chuckled. "Well, I reckon I'd better amble over tew th' old woman an' th' yunks. So-long, neighbour," and he slouched off in the direction of his waggon.

"Now, gentlemen," and Mr. Judson turned good-naturedly to the crowd still lingering around the waggon, "seeing that the circus is all over we won't keep you any longer, and you can return to your several duties, with our thanks for your friendly interest. We're all safe now, and you can leave us without fear of our getting into any further trouble."

The men laughed, cracked a few jokes, and hurried away.

Arthur, like many boys, had been given a little to boasting, but hereafter it was only necessary to mention Bob's big nugget when anything like a brag came from his lips to transform him immediately into a modest, blushing boy.

"Now for Independence," Mr. Judson said as soon as the field was cleared of the crowd, and straightway began yoking the oxen to the waggon, an operation that interested Mildred and the boys immensely, for it was the actual beginning of their long journey overland to California. From now on they were emigrants with no home but the waggon or tent. They were about to make the actual "jump off" that would place them

beyond the protection and comforts and luxuries of civilisation.

At last all was ready for the first turning of the wheels westward. Mildred and the boys with much laughter assisted Mrs. Judson to the place of honour on the driver's seat, and then scrambled over the back of the seat and stood up behind her. Jedidiah Judson gripped the long-lashed whip in his right hand, cast a swift glance over the oxen, and jumped to the seat by the side of Mrs. Judson. For a moment there was silence, each, even the children, was thinking of what the journey about to be begun might portend, and then the irrepressible enthusiasm of youth broke loose.

"Ho, for California!" shouted Ray.

"Hurrah for California!" yelled Arthur.

"We're off! Hurrah, we're off for California!" cried Mildred.

"Hurrah, hurrah, for the gold mines of California!" laughed Mrs. Judson.

"California or bust!" exclaimed Jedidiah Judson, and swung his whip. The long lash cracked, the willing oxen strained at their creaking yokes, the wheels of the heavy waggon turned, and the long, overland journey had begun.

Jud Jimpson and his entire family were out in force to see them off, and promised to hunt them up when they came over to Independence in a day or two, and shouted and waved their good-byes as long as sight or hearing could reach them.

CHAPTER NINE

SCOOT

THE sun was nearing the Western horizon when our friends drove through Independence. The streets of the town were crowded with emigrants and with a wild medley of hunters, trappers, Mexicans, half-breeds, Indians, horses, mules, oxen, and dogs. A large number of roughly built stores, filled with necessaries for the long journey across the plains, offered their wares on every hand. From all sides came the sound of the blacksmiths' hammers, busy repairing the waggons and shoeing the horses, mules, and oxen of the emigrants. A spirit of feverish excitement and unrest was in the air. " I am bound for the gold mines of California, hurry! " seemed written on every face.

Mr. Judson did not stop in town. If they pitched camp before it became dark there would be no time for sightseeing.

The wide prairie westward from the town was nearly covered with the waggons and tents of the emigrants, and on the open plains beyond hundreds of cattle and horses were grazing. Picturesque groups of emigrants were gathered about the waggons and the tents. Some were cooking the evening meal in the open air; others were repairing their tents or waggon-covers, or mending their clothes, or trading off parts of their

outfits; children were running in and out among the tents and waggons, watched by their mothers; and here and there knots of men were discussing excitedly and loudly the latest news from California, or some political or religious problem.

Straight through this strange suburban city of emigrants Mr. Judson drove, while the eyes of Mildred and the boys jumped from one interesting scene to another and their tongues clattered incessantly, until he came to a dry and slightly elevated bit of the prairie, not far from a small stream of water and within easy reach of an abundance of grass for the oxen. Here he halted the oxen, and shouting, "Everybody tumble out! Here's where we camp," leaped from the waggon and began at once unyoking the oxen.

The feet of Mildred and the boys struck the ground almost as soon as did those of Mr. Judson, the boys hurrying away to help unyoke and tether the oxen, and Mildred remaining at the waggon to aid her mother get supper. They had had nothing to eat save a meagre lunch since early morning, and all were "desperately hungry," as Mr. Judson put it.

A light sheet-iron cook-stove was one of the things purchased in St. Louis; and as soon as Mr. Judson and the boys returned from attending to the needs of the oxen this stove was taken from the waggon, set up on the ground, and soon had a fire roaring merrily in it.

"Now, boys, out with the tent, and we'll have it up before two jerks of a lamb's tail!" Mr. Judson called to Ray and Arthur, who had become deeply interested in Mrs. Judson's cooking the moment the stove was in place and ready to do its share of the work. "The women folks will want it for a bunking place to-night,

but we men need only the earth beneath us and the skies above for our shelter. A roomy bedroom, eh, boys!" he laughed.

The boys were in the waggon almost before he ceased speaking, and in three minutes the stout sack containing the roll of canvas, tent-pins, etc., and the tent-poles were out of the waggon and on the ground.

Mr. Judson selected a smooth plot of ground a rod to the right of the waggon, and here the tent was pitched. Ray and Arthur were surprised to find how easily and quickly this could be done when superintended by one who understood how to go about it. The tent was a wall-tent, large enough for half a dozen people to move around in it without inconvenient crowding, and so high that a tall man could stand in its centre without his head touching the ridge-pole from which its canvas roof slanted downward to within four feet of the ground. A heavy canvas fly tightly stretched over the ridge-pole afforded an additional protection from the rain and the hot rays of the sun.

"Don't it look cool and comfortable?" commented Arthur, as he pulled aside the flap and stepped in the moment the last tent-pin had been driven into the ground.

"You bet!" was Ray's emphatic response as he followed Arthur inside the tent.

"How do, Leaping Beaver? How do, White Otter? Can Smiling Waters come in?" and Mildred thrust a face dimpling with smiles and rosy with excitement through the tent opening.

"How do, squaw papoose?" grunted Arthur. "Welcome. Heap fine lodge," and then in his excitement, forgetting his Indian manners, he caught hold

of Mildred, and jerking her into the tent, exclaimed: "Oh, isn't this great, Mildred? Don't it feel cool and sweet in here?"

"Yes," and Mildred stood still in the centre of the tent and looked, in an ecstacy of childish delight, from the clean, white, slanting roof and straight walls to the soft, sweet-smelling carpet of grass beneath her feet. "Yes, it is perfectly lovely! I must show mamma how clean and cool and sweet our cloth-house is!" and Mildred darted through the tent opening, and returned a moment later pulling her laughing and protesting mother after her, and declaring that her mother must have "just a glimpse" of their "white house," "even if the meat did burn and the coffee boiled over."

Mrs. Judson was almost as enthusiastic over the tent as was Mildred herself, and was sure she could sleep as sweetly and as peaceably in it as if she were in her own bedroom at home. She told the boys to get the two cots and the other things that she and Mildred would need out of the waggon and put them in the tent, and then after directing Mildred how to arrange the things in their novel bedroom, she hurried back to her cooking, enjoying the unusual experiences of this first night on the open prairie almost as much as did the children themselves.

"Supper! Come to supper!" yelled Mr. Judson fifteen minutes later, suddenly thrusting his head into the tent, where the children were busy "fixing up" for the night's occupancy.

"Mercy, but I am glad we are to have something to eat at last!" and Mildred dropped the bundle of clothes she was about to place on one of the cots. "Come on. I'll beat you to the table." She rushed out

of the tent, followed by Ray and Arthur, who did their utmost to get to where Mrs. Judson had spread a white table-cloth on the green grass and placed the food thereon, picnic style, before the girl did; but Mildred's feet were as swift as a young fawn's, and she reached the cloth a good six feet ahead of either boy.

"There!" she cried, as she came to a sudden halt in front of a steaming plate of potatoes. "I told you I could beat you to the table, and I did," and her cheeks dimpled and her eyes sparkled. "You boys are so slow!"

"But—but where is the table?" panted Arthur. "I can't see any table, so how could you have beaten us to it?" and he looked around triumphantly.

"Sure and the boy has got you, Dimples," laughed Mr. Judson. "Where is the table? Where, oh, where is the table?"

For a moment Mildred was nonplussed, then her cheeks dimpled and her eyes twinkled more merrily than ever.

"Why it is there, right there on the lap of dear Old Mother Earth, and it has a thousand beautiful green legs," and she pointed to the white cloth resting on the green grass; "and if you and Arthur can't see it, Papa Judson, then you don't get any supper, do they, mamma? Now all who can find the table be seated," and she threw herself down on the ground by the side of the plate of potatoes.

"Hurrah for Mildred's grass-legged table!" shouted Ray, dropping down by her side. "I see the food, and I don't care what sort of a table is under it. Here goes," and he helped himself to a huge slice of bread.

"Same here," and Arthur flopped down on the grass by his side. "I was blind, but now I can see Mildred's table, and it's fine—I mean the food," and he, too, caught up a slice of bread. "This is great. Just like a picnic," and a huge mouthful of bread stopped his further utterance.

"Good for you!" and Mr. Judson pinched the dimple on Mildred's rosy cheek. "Such reasoning, fortified by such a threat to an empty stomach, gives me sudden light. I can see the table, and you did beat the boys; but unless you get busy at once, they will beat you at the table if they could not to the table. The smell of that meat and coffee makes me think of home and—wife," he finished with a loving glance in the direction of Mrs. Judson, who stood, smiling and flushed, directly across the table-cloth from him, a steaming coffee-pot in her hand. "Just pass me over a cup of that coffee, Cat," and he seated himself before the plate of meat. "This reminds me of a Sunday-school picnic," and his twinkling eyes looked from the happy faces of the children to that of his wife. "But," and his face sobered, "I fear we will find it no picnic before we reach California."

"Now, Jed, never mind the future. We live only in the present. Let us get all the joy out of it we can, and we will be in all the better shape to meet trouble if it should come. Do you take sugar and milk in your coffee, Ray?" and Mrs. Judson turned her smiling face to Ray, who promptly answered in the affirmative.

That first meal in the open air on the wide prairie with the tents and waggons of the gold-seekers all about them was one to be long remembered by Mildred and the two boys. It seemed as if something

amusing was said or done every minute; and so interested were all, each in the doings of the others, that no one saw the ragged piccaninny approaching, step by step, as if drawn by an irresistible fascination to the merry group, until he paused almost directly behind Mildred, his rolling eyes fixed hungrily on the bountiful feast, and his thick lips parted, showing two rows of shiny white teeth that looked as if they might be fairly aching to get hold of some of the good things before them. He had a round, jolly face, black and shiny as a polished stove, the shortest of kinky black hair, and huge ears that stuck out from each side of his head like black, skinny wings. He wore no hat, his tattered shirt was several sizes too large, and his ragged trousers, held in place by strings, had evidently once belonged to a man and had been fitted to him by the simple process of cutting off their legs. This access of trousers about the middle gave his body a curious and comical resemblance to that of a toad. He appeared to be about ten years old, and looked as if he, like Topsy, might have "growed" up some dark morn without human aid or care.

Almost at the same moment that this black tatterdemalion paused behind Mildred, she jumped to her feet, whirled around to run to the waggon to get a needed dish, and nearly tumbled over the little negro boy before she saw him.

"Oh!" and Mildred stopped short and stared in the utmost astonishment at the queer little bit of black humanity. "Where did you drop from?"

"I done tumbled out ob de debbel's coal-scuttle," grinned the little imp, rolling his eyes and not at all abashed. "Massah Tom Pike done tolded me so. I's not

bo'ned like white fo'ks am. I's a cussed little no-'count black niggah; but I's free. Massah Tom Pike gib me my free papahs dis berry mo'ning, an' I done hab nothing to eat since," and his eyes turned hungrily to the remains of Mrs. Judson's generous supper.

"And you evidently prefer a full stomach to freedom," laughed Mr. Judson.

"Yes, sah," answered the boy, rolling the whites of his eyes in Mr. Judson's direction, "dat am it I 'specs. I's pow'ful hungry. I done hab nothing to eat since mo'ning," and his eyes looked as if they were endeavouring to draw the food from the "table" into his mouth, held open ready to receive it.

"You poor boy!" and Mildred glanced at her mother, who nodded. "You shall have something to eat this minute," and she caught up a plate and began piling on it meat and potatoes and bread and cake until it could hold no more. This she carried to the little negro and gave it to him.

"Golly, am all dat fo' me?" and he grabbed the plate with both hands, squatted down on the ground, and holding the plate on his lap, began stuffing the food into his mouth almost as fast as he could make his two hands go, while his eyes rolled from one interested face to another.

Mildred stood in front of the little negro boy and watched his gastronomic feats with astonished interest. Mrs. Judson smiled, Mr. Judson laughed loudly, and Ray and Arthur stared and grinned and made funny comments. But the small black boy continued to give his exclusive and undivided attention to the food until the last mouthful had disappeared between his gleaming white teeth. Then he arose slowly to his feet,

handed the empty plate to Mildred, smiled from ear to ear, and rubbing his fat little belly joyously, said: "I's gwine to be yo'r lil niggah boy. Massah Tom Pike done nebber feed dis niggah like dat."

"But I don't want no lil nigger boy," laughed Mildred. "Won't you tell me your name?"

"Scoot."

"What?" and Mildred stared at the black grinning face. "Your name, I asked you to tell me your name."

"I done told yo'. It's Scoot, jes' Scoot. When Massah Tom Pike want dis niggah, he yells, 'Scoot,' an' I done come. When he don't want me no mo', he says, 'Scoot,' mad-like, an' I done scoots it. Yes'm, I's jes' Scoot," and he rolled his eyes in surprise at the loud laughter with which the boys and Mr. Judson received his explanations.

"Well, Scoot," and Mr. Judson arose to his feet, "now that you have had your feed supposing you do something to earn it. Here, go to the creek and get a pail of water," and picking up a small wooden pail, he handed it to the negro boy, at the same time pointing in the direction of the small stream of water that flowed by some fifteen rods from their encampment.

"Yes, massah," and Scoot seized the pail, his face shining with willingness, and started on the run for the creek.

"Poor little fellow!" Mildred exclaimed, her eyes following the odd little figure pityingly. "I don't believe he ever had all he wanted to eat before at one time. But oh, isn't he funny? I—I—" and she looked doubtingly from the face of her father to that of her mother—"I do wish he might go with us. He—he don't seem to have anybody to care for him, and he

would be so useful getting water and washing dishes and running after things; and—and he's so comical he would keep us laughing half the time."

"He would be a walking circus on two black legs," laughed Ray.

"I am not sure but what it might be a good idea," and Mrs. Judson's motherly face lighted up with interest. "As Mildred says, there are lots of little things he might do, and I do just ache to get those ragged old clothes off him and give his black body a good scrubbing. He——"

"There, there, Cat," interrupted Mr. Judson. "Dirt and rags to you are like a red cloth to a bull, but we're not running a negro reformatory institution across the plains. Besides, the boy has a master, and we might get into trouble if we allowed him to go with us."

"But he's free," interposed Mildred. "Didn't you hear him say that he was free and that his master gave him his free papers this very morning?"

"Pooh! A likely story," and Mr. Judson smiled incredulously. "Anyway, we've all the mouths we'll want to feed, and I never did fancy a black skin, young or old, little or big. Here, you little imp," and he turned to the negro boy who had just returned with the pailful of water, "set the pail down and get back to your master, or he'll tan your hide for you."

"I done got no massah," Scoot replied, setting the pail down and standing in front of Mr. Judson. "I's a free niggah. Massah Tom Pike gib me my free papahs dis berry morning 'cause I done eat too much salt, an' done told me he nebber wants to sot eyes on me again."

"Gave you your freedom because you ate too much

salt;" laughed Mr. Judson. "Now if it had been bread and meat and potatoes and hoe cakes, judging from the way that plate of food went into your mouth, I should have applauded 'Massah' Tom Pike's good sense, but why salt?"

"He done told me I's not wo'th my salt. I dunno why he 'feared ob his salt. I nebber hook none," and Scoot scratched his woolly head. "An' dis mo'ning he done gib me a lickin' an' my free papahs, an' told me to get out an' nebber come back no mo', an' now I's gwine to be yo' niggah boy, fo' yo' food am certainly good," and Scoot looked as if that settled that important matter.

"Oh, you are, are you?" and Mr. Judson frowned. "And I don't suppose it makes any difference to you whether or not I want you? Well, it does to me. Now you black bag of rags and impudence get back to your Master Tom Pike or whoever he may be just as fast as your black legs will take you, or," and Mr. Judson stepped to the side of the waggon, caught up the long-lashed ox-whip, and swinging it swiftly around his head, cracked the snapper with a pistol-like report, within a foot of Scoot's startled ears.

"Golly!" and Scoot jumped as if it had been a real pistol and aimed at his head, and with a swift glance at Mr. Judson's frowning face, darted away as fast as his black legs could carry him, spurred for a few rods by the crack, crack of Mr. Judson's whip-lash.

"Papa, Papa Judson!" and Mildred, flushed and angry, caught hold of her father's arm, "why did you do that?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Dimples," Mr. Judson answered chuckling, "I did not want that black boy

hanging around this camp all the time; and as he didn't appear to be able to take a word-hint, I thought I would see what the whip would do. Great, wasn't it?" and he pointed to the still running negro boy and laughed. "He understands the whip language all right, if he doesn't the English. You didn't think I intended to hurt the little tike, did you?" and he laid a hand caressingly on Mildred's head. "Why, I just wanted to frighten him so that he wouldn't be hanging around us all night. It's all right, girlie. Now give your mother the help of two willing hands and legs, for it is early to bed and early to rise from now on with us. See the sun has already set, and there is much yet to be done before we can get settled for the night," and he pointed across the prairie to the far Western horizon, aflame with the ruddy afterglow of the setting sun.

Mr. Judson built a small camp-fire in front of the tent opening; and around this, when everything had been made ready for the night, which was not accomplished until it was nearing nine o'clock, they all gathered for a few minutes' talk before going to their "beds."

The night was cloudless, and above their heads shone the silvery crescent of a new moon and thousands of sparkling stars, while all around them, in whatever direction they looked, were the glowing camp-fires of the gold-seekers, surrounded by groups of dark, moving figures. In the darker background the tents and white-topped waggons showed a bit ghostly in the dim moonlight. A little to the eastward a party of men were singing merrily around their camp-fire, and from the south came the "plunk," "plunk," of a banjo

accompanied by the sweet voice of a woman. Not far away a baby was crying, and from a greater distance came the sounds of the laughter and singing of men and women, the shouts and cries of children, the barking of dogs, the occasional lowing of a cow, and the other noises peculiar to such an encampment. All these varied sounds seemed to mingle and blend harmoniously together in the still prairie air of the early night, and added to the charm and romance of the scene.

Neither Mildred nor the boys ever forgot the spell of that first night around the camp-fire on the open plains, when all was new and strange and wonderful and dream-like, and not one of the hard, matter-of-fact realities had yet thrust itself forward to dispel the illusion that crossing the plains in a prairie-schooner was anything but a picnic. How fortunate it is that we cannot look into the future and see the hardships and perils that we may be called upon to endure and brave!

For nearly an hour they sat talking, with the glow of the camp-fire shining on their faces, then Mr. Judson arose to his feet.

"To bed, everybody!" he commanded. "To-morrow's sunrise must find us up and stirring. Now get into your white house, and may your sleep be undisturbed and your dreams sweet," and he kissed the dimple on each of Mildred's cheeks and bade her and Mrs. Judson good-night. "Come, boys, get your blankets. We will bunk right here by the fire," and accompanied by Ray and Arthur, he went to the waggon after his own blankets.

"Is no one to keep watch for fear some one will get into the waggon and steal something while we sleep?" Ray asked, as he spread his blanket out on the ground,

and lying down with his feet to the fire, Indian fashion, proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible.

"No, I hardly think it is necessary," Mr. Judson replied. "We have little to fear from sneak thieves now that we are in camp where thieves are given short trials and long ropes. No more talking. Good-night," and Mr. Judson rolled himself up in his blanket and closed his eyes, little thinking that before morning he would have good cause to change his views regarding the desperate boldness of the sneak thieves that infested the encampment.

CHAPTER TEN

THE BLACK SPOTS IN THE DARKNESS

RAY and Arthur were very tired and sleepy, and notwithstanding the hard uncomfortableness of their beds, both lads were sound asleep ten minutes after they had rolled themselves up in their blankets.

An hour, two hours, three hours passed. The campfire had burned down to a bed of ruddy coals that shone like a great red eye. In the surrounding darkness were many other red eyes. All the varied sounds of the early night had become still, save the occasional barking of a wakeful dog and the cries of the restless night birds. The heavy, regular breathings of Mr. Judson and the two boys told that they were sound asleep, while a softer sound coming from within the white walls of the tent showed the quiet serenity in which Mildred and her mother slept, doubtless dreaming of their far Eastern home. A short distance away the white-topped cover of the waggon stood out distinctly against the dark background of the night, adding to the peaceful restfulness of the scene.

Presently, in the distance back of the waggon, a black spot appeared moving cautiously in its direction. At first it was only a black spot, like an ink blot on the darkness of the night; but as it came slowly nearer and

nearer to the waggon it gradually took form. For a minute or two it had the semblance of a huge black dog prowling through the darkness; then as it paused near the waggon and straightened up, it was seen to be standing on two legs. A few steps closer and in the dim moonlight of the clear prairie air the squat black form of the little negro boy, Scoot, showed itself, standing close to the waggon and listening intently.

"Ebberybody am sound asleep," he soliloquised softly. "I's done gwine to crawl under de waggon an' get a nap befo' mo'ning, an' den I's gwine to ask dat lil gal if I can't get some mo' watah fo' some mo' eat. 'Pears like dis chile done nebber get 'nuf to eat, an' dis niggah likes dat lil gal's food," and Scoot smacked his thick lips in pleasant recollection of his recent savoury feast. "Dat am a mighty long whip," and he shook his head dubiously and hesitated. "A mighty long whip, an' I 'specs it hurts ter'ble, but dis chile goter eat, I's goter eat," and crouching suddenly, he slipped under the waggon, and lay down in the dark shadows between the two front wheels.

Possibly ten minutes passed after Scoot disappeared under the waggon when two more black spots appeared out of the surrounding darkness and began cautiously moving toward the point where the white top of Mr. Judson's waggon stood clearly outlined against the darkness. As they came nearer, the spots began to assume definite outlines, until when within a few feet of the waggon they became the dark-clothed forms of two men, stepping so carefully that their feet made not the least audible sound. When the two men reached the side of the waggon opposite to where Mr. Judson and the boys lay sleeping, they paused and straightened up.

"You crawl inside, Mike, and hand the stuff out," the taller man whispered, "and be almighty careful about making a noise. Like as not that long-legged cuss has got his shooting irons with him in the blanket."

"All right, Tom. Sing out quick if we're discovered. Jest stand where you can keep an eye on what's goin' on 'round th' camp-fire," and Mike with the utmost caution began climbing into the front end of the waggon, while his comrade with equal caution stepped close to the waggon-tongue, where he would be in sight of the sleeping forms around the camp-fire and within easy reach of whatever might be handed out. A moment later Mike disappeared within the waggon.

For perhaps a couple of minutes all was still save for a slight sound coming from within the waggon cover, then the head of Mike appeared at the opening.

"Hist! Be careful," he whispered. "I've got what feels like th' old man's money-chist," and he reached out a hand holding a small iron-bound box about a foot long and eight inches deep.

Tom took a step nearer and lifted up his hands for the box; but just as his fingers were about to close around its handle, he uttered a wild yell of terror and leaped up into the air with something black clinging to his legs, while a shrill, childish voice began screaming: "Thieves! Thieves! Help! Help, massah! I's done cotched one! Help! I's——"

With an oath Tom bent and struck furiously with clenched fist at the black thing clinging to his legs, and then as he felt the small arms relax, he gave the body a violent kick, and mumbling angry oaths dashed away as fast as an unusually long pair of legs could take him.

Mike dropped the chest and tumbled out of the waggon so quickly that he landed on his head, jumped to his feet, and rushed after his fleeing partner, followed by chunks of lead from Mr. Judson's pistols. In two minutes both men had disappeared in the surrounding darkness of the night.

For a minute the pistol shots were followed by silence. Then dogs began barking from every direction; men tumbled out of their blankets or waggons or tents, and shouting inquiries ran in the direction of the shots; children and women screamed; and in two minutes the whole encampment in the vicinity of Mr. Judson's waggon was in a wild turmoil of excitement.

Ray and Arthur, aroused from sound sleep by the cries of the negro boy, quickly followed by the shots from Mr. Judson's pistols, jumped to their feet, for the moment too startled and confused to understand what had happened, but certain that something terrible was going on. They saw Mr. Judson rushing off into the darkness back of the waggon, his smoking pistols in his hands, and both started on the run after him, calling, "What is it?" "What is the matter?" in voices shrill with excitement. After running a few rods they met Mr. Judson returning from his fruitless chase.

"Two pesky sneak thieves trying to steal things from the waggon," he replied in answer to their breathless inquiries. "Now let us see if they got away with anything," and he hurried toward the waggon.

Mildred and her mother, like Ray and Arthur, had both been sound asleep when the shrill yells of Scoot and the shots of Mr. Judson had startled the quiet of the night. Mrs. Judson jumped from her cot and stood listening for a few minutes, trembling with

apprehension, while Mildred, shivering with fright, clung tightly to her. Then she caught up a heavy shawl, and throwing it over her shoulders, went to the tent opening.

"Jed, Jed Judson!" she called. "What has happened? Who is shot? Where are you?" and then catching sight of Mr. Judson and the two boys just as they were about to approach the waggon to see if the thieves had stolen anything, she rushed from the tent to her husband's side.

"Shucks, Cat, 'twon't nothing but a couple of sneak thieves trying to make a haul out of the waggon," Mr. Judson reassured his trembling wife. "I got a couple of shots at one of them, but I reckon I didn't hit him. Now you and Mildred get back into your tent before the reception begins. You know you are not dressed for company, and—" But Mrs. Judson and Mildred, catching sight of the men running toward them from every direction, were already seeking the shelter of their tent as fast as their feet could take them.

In a moment Mr. Judson and Ray and Arthur found themselves surrounded by a crowd of excited men, all demanding to know the meaning of the cries and the shots; and when Mr. Judson told them how an attempt had been made to rob his waggon, there were many threats of the most dire punishment should the thieves be captured; for all felt that in a situation where the protection of doors and locks were impossible, the most severe penalties for thieving were absolutely necessary for the safeguarding of their property.

"Jed," and Mrs. Judson, who by this time had dressed and, accompanied by Mildred, had hurried back to the side of her husband, caught hold of Mr.

Judson's arm, "I heard a child's voice a moment before the pistol shots, and——"

"Great Scott, so there was! and it was that voice that awoke me," Mr. Judson broke in excitedly. "I reckon we owe that child something, for if it had not been for him the robbers would have had their own way. But what child could it have been? and what has become of him? I— Quick, get the lantern from the tent, Ray. I fear harm has come to the poor little fellow," and Mr. Judson's face whitened. "I remember now his cries stopped sudden, as if something had hit him. He must be near the waggon," and he began anxiously searching about on the ground, aided by the others, but it was not until Ray had brought the lantern that they found the little black body stretched out under the front end of the waggon.

"Why, it's Scoot!" and Ray, who had been the first to catch sight of the boy's face, almost dropped the lantern in his surprise and horror. "It's Scoot, and he's dead!"

"Dead, nothing," and Mr. Judson bent quickly, and picking the boy up in his arms, started with him for the tent. "Come on, Cat, and we'll bring the little tike to his senses in a jiffy. He's only been stunned by a hard rap over the head," and followed by Mrs. Judson, he disappeared through the tent opening, bidding Ray and Arthur and Mildred to stand guard outside and keep the crowd back.

"Oh, I do hope Scoot isn't hurt much!" Mildred said to Ray. "Do you think he is?"

"No," Ray replied. "I saw him open his eyes just as your dad carried him into the tent. He'll be as good as ever in no time. 'Twould take more than one rap on

the head to do much damage to a negro's skull. There, what did I tell you?"

At this moment, as if in justification of Ray's assertions, Mr. Judson pushed aside the tent flap and stepped out, leading Scoot with one hand and holding the lantern in the other.

"Sound as a dollar and as able to eat a good square meal as ever, aren't you, Scoot?" and Mr. Judson held the lantern so that its light showed the little negro boy clearly to all.

"Yes, sah," answered Scoot, grinning. "I is pow'ful hungry. 'Pears like I nebber done get 'nuf to eat."

The men laughed; and satisfied that no great harm had been done the negro boy, and that now it would be useless to look for the thieves, returned to their own camps and beds, leaving our friends and Scoot once more alone.

"Now, Mildred, you get right back into bed and to sleep again, just as quick as you can get them bright eyes of yours shut. Scoot will bunk with me and the boys, and in the morning I am going to appoint you a committee of one to see that this little black tike gets just all the feed he can stuff down himself. He's earnt it," and Mr. Judson caught Mildred up in his arms, gave her a kiss, and tossed her, laughing and protesting that she wasn't a bit sleepy, through the tent opening.

"Now, boys, we'll get back to our downy couches, and mind, no talking. We'll leave that for the morning. Come on, Scoot, you'll need a blanket," and Mr. Judson, followed by the black boy, went to the waggon and got out a blanket for him.

Ray and Arthur returned to their blankets by the camp-fire, Scoot rolled himself up in his blanket and

laid down under the waggon, and Mr. Judson, after having assured himself that nothing of any value had been taken from the waggon, threw a fresh armful of wood on the fire so that it blazed up brightly, and spreading out his blanket on the ground near the waggon, stretched himself out on it and was soon slumbering soundly, confident that there would be no more thieving in the vicinity of his waggon that night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SCOOT'S "FREE PAPAHS"

THE sun had but just begun to brighten the Eastern skies when Jedidiah Judson threw off his blanket, stretched his long arms and legs, and jumped to his feet. There were many things to be done that day, and to do them all he needed an early start. Ray and Arthur were still sound asleep, and under the waggon Scoot was snoring noisily.

"Poor little tike!" and Mr. Judson stood for a moment looking down contemplatively on the little negro boy. "I reckon life don't mean much to him except just to get enough to eat. Well, he shall have all he can stuff inside of him for once in his life, if it gives him colic for a month afterward. He deserves it. 'Twas a mighty good thing for me— Good Lord!" Mr. Judson's eyes had just caught sight of the little iron-bound chest that one of the thieves had dropped, which lay partly hidden by one of the front wheels of the waggon, and had not been seen in the darkness and hurry of the previous search, and his face whitened, and he bent quickly and caught the chest up and examined it carefully, even unlocking it and looking at its contents.

"Well, Jedidiah Judson," he said half aloud but with great emphasis, "you are a consummate fool, and don't deserve such luck as this, to go and leave that money-box where any pesky thief could lay hands on it

the moment he was inside the waggon! Every blessed cent that I and the boys have in the world, too! And the rascals would have got away with it easy if it hadn't been for that black little beggar!" and he glanced toward the sleeping negro lad. "Yes, you're a consummate idiot, Jedidiah Judson," and carefully holding the chest in one hand, he began climbing into the waggon, still muttering imprecations on his carelessness in thus leaving the treasury exposed. When in the waggon he moved aside a trunk that stood near the centre of the waggon-box, knelt down on the bottom of the box, and pressed his finger on the head of the sixth nail, counting from the right-hand side of the waggon in a row of nails that here crossed the box bottom. At the pressure of his finger a board a trifle longer and wider than the length and width of the chest slid back, showing a secret receptacle just large enough to securely hold the money-box. Mr. Judson at once slipped the box into this hiding-place, slid the board back, replaced the trunk over it, and climbed out of the waggon.

No one but himself and Mrs. Judson knew of this secret treasury vault in the bottom of the waggon-box, for the chest contained nearly twenty-five thousand dollars, all of Mr. Judson's wealth and the few dollars left of the boys' money, and it was not thought best to let the children know anything about this large sum, or where the chest was kept, lest thoughtlessly they might sometime give a hint of its existence to others, which would be all that was needed to make it the prey of every thieving rascal between there and California.

Mr. Judson had taken the chest out of its hiding-place the day before to count the money, and being suddenly called away while still at the counting, he had

thrown a blanket over the chest, intending to return at once and complete the reckoning, and then in the hurry and excitement he had forgotten all about the exposed money-box until he saw it lying on the ground by the side of the waggon-wheel. In his hasty examination of the waggon after the attempted robbery he had seen that the trunk stood directly over the hiding-place, and had taken it for granted that the treasure lay safely concealed beneath it.

This will explain to you why the sight of the chest lying on the ground gave Mr. Judson so great a fright, and why he considered it necessary to tell Jedidiah Judson what a "consummate fool" he was.

From the waggon Mr. Judson went direct to where Ray and Arthur lay side by side near the smouldering camp-fire.

"Time everybody was up! Turn out!" and catching hold of a blanket with each hand, he gave a sudden strong pull, and sent both sleeping lads rolling out of their blankets.

"All right! I'm coming!—Oh!—Where—where am I?" and Ray jumped to his feet, rubbing his eyes and staring blankly around him, followed by Arthur, who for the moment was equally mystified by his sudden transition from the land of dreams to the prairies of the West.

"Well, I reckon you are standing on the green sod of the prairie, bound for the gold mines of California," and Jed Judson laughed. "Now both of you go to the creek and wash the sleep out of your eyes. This is our busy day."

"Sure, and I thought I was back at old Thompson's, and he was pulling me out of my bed. It's good to wake

up from such a dream and find myself here," and Ray laughed joyously. "Come on, Art," and he started on the run for the creek with Arthur racing by his side.

"I'll let the little beggar sleep," and Mr. Judson looked toward the black bundle of rags curled up under the waggon. "'Twas a mighty good turn he did you, Jedidiah Judson, last night, a mighty good turn; and don't you forget it. No, sirree, don't you forget it, Jed Judson," and he started off in the direction of the oxen to see if everything was all right with the cattle.

When the boys came back from helping Mr. Judson with the cattle (they had gone from the creek to the oxen), they found a fire crackling merrily in the stove and Mildred and her mother already busy with the breakfast.

"Now, Dimples," and Mr. Judson laid a hand caressingly on Mildred's head, "you just do your level best to see that Scoot gets the biggest and best feed he ever had in his life. We all owe the black little imp a lot for what he did last night, and I reckon a big feed will come about as nigh as anything to convincing him of our gratitude. I'll rout out the little beggar," and he turned toward the waggon where Scoot was still snoring.

"Breakfast! Time to eat! Get up!" and Mr. Judson seized hold of one end of the blanket on which Scoot was lying and pulled him out from under the waggon.

The negro boy rolled over, rubbed his two black fists into his eyes, caught sight of Mr. Judson, and jumped to his feet.

"Golly!" and he began backing off, keeping wary eyes on Mr. Judson, doubtless remembering the long

whip-lash that had cracked so near his ears, "dis niggah done dis'member to wake up fo' shuah! I's," and his face brightened as he caught sight of Mildred, "I's done gwine to get de lil gal a pail ob watah. Dat's what fo' I's har. Whar am dat watah-pail?" and he looked around, his eyes rolling and his lips twisting in the most comical manner.

"Well, Scoot," and Mr. Judson smiled genially, "you did us all a mighty good turn last night when you scart off them thieves, and we are going to celebrate it this morning by giving you the biggest feed you ever had in all your born days."

"And mamma and I think you were real brave," Mildred broke in, "to cry out when you must have known the wicked men would hurt you, and they did hurt you awful, 'cause when I first saw you I thought you were dead; and now papa is your friend and won't crack you any more with his long whip, will you, papa?"

"Not another crack," Mr. Judson answered heartily. "And here's my hand on it. Shake," and he held out his hand to Scoot, who, with his mouth stretched into a grin that threatened to engulf his entire face and eyes rolling back and forth from the face of Mildred to the face of her father, had stood balancing himself first on one chubby black foot, then on the other, while Mr. Judson and Mildred were speaking.

For a moment Scoot hesitated, and then disregarding Mr. Judson's extended hand, he marched straight up to Mildred and timidly thrust out his hand to her.

"I done cotch Massah Tom Pike 'round de legs an' yell," he said proudly, "'cause he was gwine thieving in yo' waggon, an' yo' was good to dis niggah, an' den

he hit me, an' I done know no mo' 'bout de thieving. Did yo' done cotch him?" and he dropped the hand that Mildred had given him and turned toward Mr. Judson.

"Was one of them pesky thieves your old master?" and Mr. Judson hurried to the side of the negro boy. "And do you know where he's camped?" and the lines on his face hardened and his blue eyes glinted.

"Sho', dat was Massah Tom Pike, him what I cotched 'round de legs. I done know his voice an' de feel ob his fist. Massah Tom Pike hab a berry hard fist," and Scoot felt cautiously of the bump that stood out like a black egg on the top of his head. "He am camped ober yondah," and Scoot pointed northward to where a small hill rose above the level of the prairie, "jes' ober de top ob de hill."

"Scoot, you are a jewel, a black diamond," and Mr. Judson patted the kinky top of his head. "Now go to the creek and scrub some of the dirt off your face and hands, and get yourself ready for a heap big eat, as our Indian friends would say. After the feed you and I will go over and interview your 'Massah' Tom Pike. I have something very particular to say to him," and Mr. Judson's firm lips hardened into two straight lines. "Here, Ray, you and Arthur go with him. He'll need help if he ever gets that face and hands clean."

The boys laughed, and catching hold of Scoot, one on each side, started on the run with him for the creek, his stubby figure bobbing up and down between them something like a huge rubber ball.

"Cat," Mr. Judson said, as he walked over to where his wife was busy at the stove cooking the breakfast, "I want a few minutes' private confabulation with you,

so just send Mildred into the tent to do something that will keep her busy for about ten minutes."

Mrs. Judson smiled, and calling Mildred, told her to go and tidy up the tent. "And be sure you open the windows wide and air the room and the bedclothing good," she warned laughingly as Mildred hurried away to obey her instructions. "Now, Jed," and she turned a smiling face to her husband.

Mr. Judson stepped up close to the side of his wife, and for ten minutes the two talked in low voices of Scoot and the attempted robbery, and of how they could best reward the little negro boy for the great service he had done them.

The breakfast that followed was one long to be remembered. Scoot, who had been brought back from the creek with a face shining like polished ebony, had a "table" all to himself, and three laughing waiters—Mildred and the two boys—to supply him with the good things Mrs. Judson had cooked, and he kept the waiters busy.

"His stomach must be made out of India-rubber with an unlimited stretch," Ray laughed as the three met at the stove.

"Or else he's got a self-condenser attachment warranted to condense anything it gets hold of to a one-hundredth part of its original bigness," Arthur suggested, by way of solving the mystery. "I am sure I have brought him almost a bushel of grub already, and he's still looking for more."

"Perhaps he's hollow like my black rubber doll," Mildred ventured, her eyes twinkling and her cheeks dimpling. "But oh, isn't it great fun just to see him eat? He looks and acts as if it tasted so good."

However, there is a limit to the capacity of even an India-rubber, self-condensing, hollow-rubber-doll sort of a stomach, as Scoot discovered to his very evident disgust, when with a mighty sigh and both hands clasped tightly over his distended belly, he was compelled to decline the third big piece of lemon pie, proffered to him as a sort of anticlimax to the real climax of the meal which he had reached through the pleasant mediums of hot porridge and milk and meat and potatoes.

"I's done completely stufficated," he remarked solemnly, with eyes fixed longingly on the piece of pie, and tears trickling down his shining black cheeks, tears of blissful satisfaction. "I done nebber hab 'nuf to eat befo' all ter once, an' I nebber 'spected to 'til I done got to hebben; but I sho' is filled up now, an' can't no how 'nosticate dat pie." Scoot rejoiced in a unique vocabulary of big-sounding words, which he used with an utter disregard of their dictionary meaning and pronunciation wherever their sound seemed to him to fit in all right.

"Now I reckon I'll just have a look at them free papers of yours, Scoot," Mr. Judson said, when at last the boy had thus finished his breakfast to his own entire satisfaction and the amazed amusement of his new friends, "and see what sort of a deal Mr. Tom Pike has dealt you."

"Yes, sah," and Scoot struggled to his feet, and thrusting a hand under his ragged shirt, brought out a legal-looking folded paper. "I's a free niggah, an' har am my free papahs," and he handed the paper to Mr. Judson.

Mr. Judson took the paper, opened it, glanced at its contents, and laughed.

"I thought it was some game like this," he said. "Now listen to Scoot's free papers," and he read:

"To Whom It May Concern:

"Know ye that I, Thomas Richard Pike, late of the State of Kentucky and now of that God-forsaken hole of perdition on the ragged edge of civilisation known as Independence, being of sound mind, and about to start for the gold mines of California, and wishing to get rid of all useless, unsalable truck, do freely give the bearer, a worthless, lying, thieving, lazy, not-worth-his-salt, always-hungry, black negro boy, eleven years old, responding to the name of Scoot, the last of my patrimony, to any one who will take him, on the sole and only condition that the receiver of this black skin-full-of-trouble bestows upon the said negro boy, Scoot, every morning and every evening of every day of every year that the said Scoot is in his or her possession a severe whipping.

"Any failure to comply with this condition on any morning or any night of any day of any year while this contract is in force, will render this agreement null and void, and restore all the original inherited and vested rights in the said negro boy, Scoot, to his original owner, the donor, Thomas Richard Pike.

"Signed. Thomas Richard Pike."

"There, that is how your free papers read, Scoot," Mr. Judson laughed, as he refolded the paper and thrust it into his own pocket. "And according to it if I keep you, I will be obliged to give you a good thrashing every night and morning. What do you think about it, Scoot? Will you be my nigger boy? or will you try to find some one with less muscular arms? I am powerful good on the licking," and Mr. Judson pushed up the sleeve of his right arm, displaying its brawny muscles.

"Am dat lickin' down on dat papah?" Scoot inquired, beginning to back off and eyeing Mr. Judson suspiciously. "An' must I take a whalin' ebbry morning an' ebbry night?"

"Yes, that is what the paper says," Mr. Judson replied. "You must take the licking or go back to your old master."

For a minute or two Scoot stood in perplexed indecision, his eyes rolling from Mr. Judson's muscular arm to the remains of the bountiful breakfast he had just eaten, his black forehead corrugated with thought wrinkles, and one hand scratching his kinky head. Suddenly his face brightened and he straightened up resolutely.

"Massah Tom Pike done gib me a lickin' 'most ebbry day anyhow, an' he done nebber feed me like dat," and Scoot glanced toward the empty dishes. "I's gwine to stay where I gits de feed. I's gwine to be yo' niggah boy. I spec'lates dem lickin's sho'ly do dis niggah good, 'cause I's a little black limb ob sin," and Scoot puckered up his lips so dolefully and rolled his eyes so ludicrously that even Mrs. Judson laughed.

"Bully for you, Scoot! A licking on a full stomach is certainly better than a licking on an empty stomach. But I reckon I can persuade Mr. Tom Pike to cut them lickings out," and the lines on Mr. Judson's face hardened, "if you will take me to him. Now," and Mr. Judson turned to Ray and Arthur, "you boys stay right here and watch the waggon and the cattle, and help Cat all that you can until we get back. Come on, Scoot. I am right anxious for that interview with your 'Massah' Tom Pike," and Mr. Judson, with Scoot trotting along by his side, started off in the direction of the hill, "jes' ober de top" of which Scoot had informed him he would find the camp of Mr. Tom Pike.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TOM PIKE

THE distance to the hill toward which Mr. Judson and Scoot were making their way was something like a mile, and the way thither led directly through the encampment of the gold-seekers, who were busy with their early morning work. Camp-fires were being replenished, cook-stoves were sending up columns of smoke, frowsy men and women and children were moving hither and thither about the tents and waggons and camp-fires, or carrying water in pails from the creek, while it seemed as if an almost countless number of dogs ran about barking and yelping. All were good-natured, even the dogs, and many were the laughing gibes called after the oddly assorted couple, as Mr. Judson's long legs and Scoot's short ones carried them through the encampment. At length they reached the hill, and when they stood on its summit, Scoot pointed to a dilapidated-looking tent some ten rods farther on, pitched near an equally dilapidated-looking waggon. Evidently the owners were not in a very flourishing financial condition.

"Dat am Massah Tom Pike's tent," he said. "I 'spects he am asleep. He am a scan'lous sleepah. Nebber done git up 'til 'most dinnah-time."

"Well, he'll get up now," Mr. Judson said, striding

toward the tent, and at the same time placing his right hand on the butt of his revolver and hitching it forward to where he could get at it quickly if there were need.

"Dar he am! Dat am he!" Scoot whispered excitedly as a man stuck his head out of the tent opening when they were a couple of rods away, glanced furtively about, caught sight of Mr. Judson and Scoot, glared for a moment questioningly at them, and then stepped out of his tent.

Mr. Tom Pike was a tall, slenderly built man, with a ragged black beard covering the lower part of his face, above which glowed a pair of red-lidded black eyes beneath overhanging arches of black, scraggly eyebrows. The skin beneath the beard showed red and bloated. A high, white, intellectual-looking forehead was the sole redeeming feature of a face that showed only too plainly how completely its owner had surrendered himself to the viler passions—drink and its foul brood of attendant evils. Evidently Mr. Tom Pike had but just crawled out of his blankets, for his hair and beard had not even received a combing from his fingers, and his trousers hung by one suspender—he wore no coat—and his shirt still had the bed-wrinkles in it.

"Scoot, you black imp of sin," he called out, scowling fiercely and taking no notice of Mr. Judson, "didn't I tell you if you ever showed up again I'd paint that black back of yours red? And now I am going to do it unless you light out of here as if the devil were after you," and reaching inside the tent, he caught up a heavy rawhide whip and started toward Scoot.

Scoot grinned, and jumping quickly behind Mr. Judson, made faces at his wrathful old master.

"The boy just came along to show me where you camped," Mr. Judson said quietly, stepping in front of the angry man. "And I reckon you won't need any whip to-day, so you'd better toss it back into the tent. I came to talk with you about that boy Scoot."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Tom Pike inquired sarcastically, stopping and facing Mr. Judson. "Well, that worthless black skinful of lazy bones ain't worth your breath, so you can go back again. I ain't hankering none for your company," and the red face scowled while the restless black eyes glanced furtively at Mr. Judson.

"And," continued Mr. Judson blandly, "I came to get this negro boy's free papers."

"Came to get Scoot's free papers!" and the man burst into a loud laugh. "Came to get Scoot's free papers! Did you hear that, Mike?" and he turned toward the tent. "Come out and have a look at the biggest darn fool in this big encampment of fools. Now," and he turned to Mr. Judson again, "just wait until my partner gets a sight of that fool face of yours, and then get out of here as fast as them long legs of yours can take you. This locality won't be none healthy for a man of your physiognomy longer than about two minutes." It was plain to be seen that Mr. Tom Pike had not yet slept off the effects of his last night's debauch, and that he was in a particular ugly humour.

A volley of oaths came from within the tent, and then a short, thick-set man stepped out, gripping a rifle in his right hand and looking as savage as an angry bulldog.

Mr. Judson had continued to approach, and he now stood only a few feet from the two men. He was still

smiling, but there was a dangerous glint in his blue eyes, and he held his body ready for instant action.

"Yes, I came for Scoot's free papers, and you are going to give them to me without any more words," he said, his voice hardening, "or——"

"Now, Mike, ready," interrupted Tom Pike, "we'll——"

But Mr. Judson did not wait for the two half-drunken rowdies to spring upon him. With a quick step forward, he swung back his right arm, and his right fist shot out and struck Tom Pike a blow under the chin that sent him hurtling back against Mike and then stunned and senseless to the ground; and when Mike straightened himself up and got ready to act, he found himself looking into the muzzle of Mr. Judson's revolver, and quickly concluded he would not act.

"Hand over that rifle, butt first!" Mr. Judson commanded.

Mike handed him the rifle, and Mr. Judson tossed it a couple of rods away.

"Sit down!"

Mike sat down, his fascinated eyes never for an instant turning from the little round hole in the barrel of Mr. Judson's revolver.

By this time Tom Pike began to show signs of returning consciousness. Mr. Judson waited quietly, keeping the two rascals covered with his weapon until Tom Pike came to his senses sufficiently to understand the situation. Then he gave Tom Pike two minutes to decide whether he would give Scoot his freedom and leave the encampment or take the consequences of his attempt to rob his waggon last night, warning him that in the present temper of the emigrants a robber was

apt to receive scant mercy at their hands; that in all probability he would be dangling at the end of a rope within ten minutes after they got hold of him.

Both men grew white, they knew only too well the truth of Mr. Judson's assertions concerning the temper of the emigrants, glared viciously at Mr. Judson and his levelled weapon, and weakened.

Two hours later Scoot was a legally free negro, with the papers testifying to that fact safely stowed away in Mr. Judson's pocket; and Tom Pike and his partner, Mike, were driving away from Independence in their dilapidated old waggon, vowing that they would yet get even with Jedidiah Judson and that "little black imp of perdition," Scoot, before they reached the gold mines of California, and that they would yet have another try for that iron-bound chest, which Mike felt sure was full of money, for he had heard the jingle of the coins as the box struck the ground by the side of his head when he had tumbled from the waggon, so he said. But the results of the nefarious plannings of these two wicked men, as they rode out of Independence hot and vengeful, must be left for future narration.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AN ADVENTURE WITH A BAD MAN

WHEN Mr. Judson and Scoot returned to the camp by the creek, Mildred and Ray and Arthur and even Mrs. Judson crowded eagerly around them, all anxious to learn the outcome of the interview with Tom Pike.

Mr. Judson described the interview and its results; and then taking Scoot's free papers out of his pocket, he presented them to him, telling him that now he was really and truly free and no longer a chattel that could be bought and sold like a bag of potatoes.

"I's splendifrusly obligated to yo', 'deed I is," Scoot said, taking the papers, doubtless feeling that he needed his mightiest words to express the bigness of his obligation, and eyeing them curiously. "I's a free niggah now, an' don't belong to nobody no mo', is I?" and his face began to sober and lengthen.

Mr. Judson assured him that he was right.

"Den," and the corners of his mouth dropped dejectedly, "I wants to know who am going to feed dis niggah."

"I reckon you will have to get out and hustle for your own grub," laughed Mr. Judson. "That's what all us free fellows have to do."

"Oh, papa, now Scoot can go with us! He's free,"

Mildred broke in joyously. "He'll be so handy washing dishes and carrying water and—and doing lots of other things."

"Yes um," and Scoot's eyes brightened, and he grinned all over his face at the thought of this pleasant solution of his difficulty, "I's done gwine to go wid yo'. I's gwine to be yo' lil niggah boy. Nebber done hab no such eatin' befo'."

"All right, Scoot. You can go with us," Mr. Judson agreed genially. "You did us all a mighty good turn last night, and Jed Judson is not the man to forget it; and Cat and I have concluded to give you your feed and clothing as long as you behave yourself as a decent negro should. But mind, there must be no shirking. You've got to work for your keep. So it's ho for the gold mines of California now, Scoot!"

Ray and Arthur and Mildred shouted by way of welcoming this new recruit, Mrs. Judson smiled and nodded her head approvingly, and Scoot, flinging up his hands, gave a glad shout and began dancing a jig to a wild tune of his own humming; and in two minutes he had them all shrieking with laughter, so comical and varied were the expressions that jumped all over his face, and so funny were the motions of his odd little body and limbs.

"Now," Mr. Judson said, when the twinkling black feet were still and the laughter had quieted down, "get dinner as soon as you can, Cat, for I want to go to Independence this afternoon to get a lot of things that we'll need; and you two boys can go with me"—and he turned to Ray and Arthur—"to help lug the things back. I want to buy another yoke of oxen and a milch cow, too, if I run across the right kind of cattle. Three

yoke of oxen won't be none too many to haul this waggon across the plains and over the mountains to California, and cow's milk will taste mighty good when we're out on the plains."

Accordingly, as soon as the noon-day meal had been eaten, Mr. Judson and Ray and Arthur set out on foot for Independence, which was a little over a mile from their camp on the prairie, and reached the crowded streets of the town about one o'clock.

A multitude of shops had sprung up, almost like mushrooms in a single night, to supply the stream of gold-seekers that was constantly pouring into the place with necessaries for the long journey to far-off California, and about these places swarmed the emigrants with a great buzzing of excited talk, buying and selling and trading. Saloons and dance-halls and gambling resorts were everywhere, and everywhere they were crowded with men of all nationalities and of all grades and conditions of life. It looked almost as if Independence had become the dumping-ground of the nations, so varied were the nationalities there represented. The two great rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri, reached out like two great hands not only across the United States, but also across the ocean, beckoning the adventurous, the idle, and the vicious of all nations to this New Eldorado, the gold mines of California; and they came in ship-loads from all parts of America and Europe, landing for the most part at Independence, there to attend to the final outfitting and to take their last long breath of civilisation before venturing the plains and deserts and mountains that lay between them and their Eldorado.

Tall, gaunt, weather-beaten trappers and "mountain

men," dressed partly in skins and carrying long-barrelled rifles, swarthy-faced Mexicans, cruel-eyed half-breeds, stolid, dirty-looking Indians, all equally native to that wild country and all staring sullenly and but half understandingly at this motley throng of alien peoples, stalked or glided, according to breed or nature, through the crowds and in and out of the shops and saloons, giving a picturesque colouring to the wild scene.

The air was filled with a bedlam of sounds. Half-drunken men were yelling and singing and cursing and —sometimes—shooting. From the dance-halls came the sounds of lively music and the clatter of rough-shod feet on hard-board floors. Constant streams of waggons were creaking and rattling through the streets, many of them fresh arrivals on their way to swell the city of tents on the prairie beyond the town. The ringing thud of blacksmiths' hammers came from innumerable smithies, where outfits were being put in shape for the long, hard pilgrimage across the plains. Everywhere was excitement and confusion and noise.

Such was Independence in the summer of 1849, after the first great waves of excited gold-seekers had rolled into it, and broke, only to form again and roll on westward—resulting in the most important nation-building exodus in the history of the United States.

No wonder that Ray and Arthur, as they followed Mr. Judson through the crowded streets, felt that all the world had gone gold mad and had started for California.

"And to think," Arthur said, "this is but one of many like starting points all along our Western frontier, while thousands of others are, doubtless, going to

the mines by way of the Pacific Ocean. Well, I hope there will be space enough left for us to swing our picks in when we get there— Hello! Look out there with that elbow! I've got some feelings left," and Arthur turned indignantly on a tall, slim young man who was roughly pushing his way through the crowd and had vigorously thrust the point of his elbow into the boy's side.

The man whirled partly around, glanced toward the boys, and the next instant had vanished in the crowd.

"Jee-my'-mee!" and Ray caught hold of Arthur's shoulder. "Did you see that face? Do you know who that was? That was the gambler Tom Rawlins knocked down on board the *Queen of the Ohio!* Do you suppose he recognised us? You know Tom Rawlins warned me to look out for him if we ever met again."

"Yes, and I am sure he recognised you," Arthur replied, "for I saw an ugly look come into his face the instant he turned his eyes in our direction. I hope he isn't bound for California. I wouldn't like him for a travelling companion on the great lonely plains."

"Well, I fancy Jedidiah Judson will be more than a match for him if he does show up," Ray said. "But hurry up, Art, or we'll lose track of Mr. Judson in this mad crowd," and closely followed by Arthur, he plunged after Mr. Judson, who was swiftly pushing his way toward the public square.

At this time the principal business part of Independence was built up around a large public square, and consisted of a few brick structures and many wooden buildings, some of these latter being mere board shacks, hastily built by enterprising traders to catch the trade of the gold-seekers while it was at its flood. Mr. Judson

paused at the entrance to one of the brick buildings, a large general store where almost anything from a shoe-string to a prairie-schooner and a yoke of oxen could be bought, and turned to Ray and Arthur.

"Now, boys," he said, "I have many things to buy, and I reckon it won't be none pleasant for you to stand around in this hot, crowded store while I am doing the buying, so if you like you can just roam around this square seeing things for about an hour. I'll be inside, or waiting for you here near the door."

"All right," both boys responded with alacrity, for the crowded store certainly did look hot and uninviting, "we will take a look around and be back long before the hour is up."

"If you see any trouble, don't you go butting your heads into it," Mr. Judson laughed as he stepped through the door and passed into the shop.

Ray and Arthur had no fear of trouble, for each felt abundantly able of taking care of himself, even in such a wild crowd as this, and eagerly pushed hither and thither among the men, seeing something to amuse or interest them at every step, and thus slowly made their way around the square. At the entrance to one of the side streets, almost directly across the square from the store Mr. Judson had entered, they came upon a great crowd of men standing in front of a saloon, and evidently enjoying themselves hugely, for there was much loud laughter and shouting.

"Seems to be something doing here. Let's see what it is," Ray said, pushing his way into the jam of men, with Arthur close at his back.

Both boys were anxious to see the fun if there was any, but so compact was the throng of men that they

could not discover the cause of the merriment until they had thrust their way quite through the crowd and stood in the inner edge of the circle that surrounded the saloon door. Then they saw a tall, broad-shouldered, red-faced, roughly dressed man, with small, snake-like eyes and a long, fierce-looking moustache, standing in the open doorway of the saloon. He held a revolver in his left hand and a long whip in his right. Evidently he was a character of some note, for all present seemed to admire and fear him, and he talked as if he owned the whole show. Besides, as it was plain to be seen by his flushed face and fiery eyes, he was ugly drunk and looking for trouble. There was a small open space in front of him, and near the middle of this stood a white-faced young Englishman whose limbs trembled so they could scarcely support him.

"My, but he's a tough-looking customer, isn't he?" Arthur whispered, staring at the man with the revolver and the whip. "I wonder what he has been doing and why that young fellow in front of him looks so scart?"

But Arthur's wonder was of short duration, for at that moment the beady black eyes of the man caught sight of him and Ray.

"My dear young friends," he cried, taking a step toward Ray and Arthur, "I am most happy to see you. You are just in time. Our young friend," and he waved his hand toward the trembling Englishman, "has become wearied, and we will give him a rest while you two young men take his place and delight our eyes with your Terpsichorean accomplishments. Now come and shake hands and allow me to introduce you to my friends and fellow-citizens, and then we'll on with the dance. Let joy be unconfined!" and quickly slipping his

revolver back into its holster and the butt of his whip under his belt, he stepped up to Ray and Arthur, and catching each one by the hand, jerked them out into the middle of the open space before either of the astonished boys knew what was happening to him; and then dropping their hands, he jumped back, jerked out his revolver and the whip, swung the whip high in the air, and brought it down with cruel force around the legs of the two startled boys.

"Dance! Dance!" shouted the man.

Ray and Arthur, with a howl of surprise and pain, bounded into the air, while the rough crowd around them yelled and laughed.

"Dance! Dance!" and the man again swung his whip in the air. "Higher! Higher! More lively there! Shake your feet! Stamp the ground! Higher! Higher! Dance!" and at each command the long lash of the whip cracked about their heels.

And how Ray and Arthur did dance! In fact they did not dare to do anything else, for they feared the revolver in the drunken brute's hand even more than they did the whip.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the yelling, hooting crowd around them, and a great giant of a fellow shoved his way through the jam of men, and sprang in front of the man with the whip, who was having such great fun with the boys that he failed to notice his approach.

"Drop that whip and revolver!" he commanded, at the same time levelling his own revolver at the bully's head.

The bully whirled about, caught sight of the levelled revolver and the stern, resolute face back of it, and

dropped the whip and the revolver as if they were red-hot irons.

"Now, since you've been having a whole lot of fun with these two boys, it won't be no more than right that you should turn about and let the boys have a lot of fun with you. Jump upon the top of that barrel," and the man pointed with his left hand to a large, empty whisky barrel standing in front of the saloon.

The bully hesitated.

"Jump! Jump quick!" and the man sent a ball from his revolver through the top of the bully's hat so close to his head that it shaved the hair off.

The bully jumped, and stood on top of the whisky barrel with legs trembling so that he could hardly stand upright.

"Now," and the man turned to Ray and Arthur, who with glad cries of recognition had sprang to the side of the big fellow the moment they heard his voice, "you boys take that whip and make that big bully dance a jig on the top of that barrel after the same manner he made you. And mind that you lay it on good. He's tough, and you'll have to hit hard to make him feel it. Now larrup him for all you are worth. I'll see that he dances proper," and he smiled grimly, keeping his revolver levelled at the trembling man on the barrel.

"Oh, Tom Rawlins, you're an angel!" Arthur exclaimed. "I was never so glad to see anybody in my life!"

"Well, that's the first time anybody ever took me for an angel," laughed Tom Rawlins. "But I reckon you boys was mighty glad to see me. Now just get busy with that whip. I'm some anxious to see them long legs get some quick moves on them."

"You're a brick!" Ray said, quickly catching up the whip. "But now I want to give that—that scoundrel a dose of his own medicine and see how he likes it," and he swung the whip above his head while his jaws came together tightly and his eyes hardened.

"Dance! Dance, you long-legged villain! Dance!" he cried, as the stinging lash, driven by all the strength in his vigorous young arm, curled around the legs of the man on the barrel, who with howls of pain and rage and fear danced a jig that would have made a dancing-master's eyes open wide with astonishment.

"Faster! Faster! Higher! Higher!" yelled Ray, warming up with his effort, and the remembrance of the bitter stings of the lash around his own legs. "Shake your feet! Stamp the barrel head! Higher! Higher! Faster! Faster!" and with each command the lash cracked around the jumping legs.

The crowd of men almost went crazy with delight. This was the kind of poetic justice that appealed especially to them. They yelled and shouted their encouragement and approval, and danced like howling dervishes around the actors in this lively comedy.

Then suddenly the scene changed. The much-abused barrel head gave way, and down into the barrel with startling swiftness shot the dancer.

The street at this point inclined steeply downward, the barrel standing almost at the summit of the inclination; and before the long legs could extricate themselves from the surrounding staves, some one in the crowd yelled: "Let's give him a free ride down the hill!"

The yell was almost instantly followed by the rush of a dozen or more men who tipped the barrel over,



"Dance! Dance, You Long-legged Villain! Dance!"

the bully still within it, whirled it about, and shouting and laughing like schoolboys gone mad on a frolic, kicked and rolled and pushed the barrel down the hill until its own momentum sent it whirling swiftly down the steep street, the man yelling and cursing within it; and then, to add to the wild gaiety of the scene, the crowd began firing off their revolvers in the direction of the spinning barrel.

In the meantime the man in the barrel was having an exceedingly exciting time of it. The barrel was of the old-fashioned kind with wooden hoops, and the nails that held the hoops in place had never been driven in with the expectation that any one would take a ride down a hill in the barrel, and they protruded a half an inch or more inside. The result on the anatomy of the unfortunate victim of his own brutality can be imagined and needs not to be described.

Near the bottom of the hill the barrel struck a stone and went to pieces. The man, with the clothing nearly torn off his body and bleeding from a thousand nail-scratches, jumped to his feet, glared wildly around him, and started on a bee-line for his horse, which was fastened a couple of rods away; and in less than two minutes he was leaving Independence behind him as fast as his horse could shake the dust off his hoofs.

"Well I reckon that's worse than riding a stiff-legged bucking bronco," and Mr. Judson, who had pushed his way through the crowd in time to see a part of the performance, pointed toward the smashed barrel. "Didn't I tell you young rascals not to go a-butting your heads into any trouble?" and he turned to Ray and Arthur, a broad smile on his face; "and here I find you in clean up to your necks and only saved by

being snatched out, as it were, by the hair of the head by the big hand of Tom Rawlins. Glad to see you, Tom," and Mr. Judson turned and gave the great hand of Tom Rawlins a hearty grip. "Never saw anything in my life that did me so much good as did the sight of that bully cavorting down the hill inside that barrel, with the nails tearing the clothes and hide off him in chunks, and him a-yelling as if all the imps in hell were jabbing him with their pitchforks," and Mr. Judson chuckled joyously. "I got here just in time to get a glimpse of you boys dancing. Didn't know you could shake your legs so lively," and he chuckled again. "Now we must be moving, for I have heard of some cattle, about a mile down the River Road, and I want to have a look at them. In want of any cattle, Tom?"

"Yes," answered Tom Rawlins. "I'll have to get another yoke. Thought of going through with horses at first, but changed my mind when I found out what was before me. Oxen are slow, but they'll stand a heap more hard travel and hard living than horses; and I reckon the critters will see plenty of both before they haul a waggon from here to California. I've got two yoke of steers, medium heavy ones, and now I want a light yoke for leaders."

"Then come right along with us," Mr. Judson invited heartily. "I'm told this fellow has about a dozen yoke of fine steers and some cows and horses, and I reckon we both can get what we want there."

Tom Rawlins, much to Ray's and Arthur's joy, for they admired their big friend hugely, gladly accepted Mr. Judson's invitation; and after a few minutes more spent in answering the good-natured badinage of the crowd, who were not in the least backward in showing

their approval of the way Tom Rawlins had dealt with the pseudo-bad man of the Wild West, they started for the ranch of the cattle dealer, intending to get the purchases made by Mr. Judson at the store on their return.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SURPRISE

MR. JUDSON and Tom Rawlins both found cattle to their liking at the ranch, and each purchased a yoke of sturdy young steers. Then Mr. Judson asked to see the horses; and to Ray's and Arthur's surprise and pleasure, purchased three strong-limbed, broad-chested Western ponies, accustomed to the rough fare of the plains. Two of the horses were broke to drive as well as to ride, but the third and smallest, a beautiful, clean-limbed mare with an unusually intelligent-looking head, had only known the saddle.

"She's gentle and true and about as fast as they make horses," the dealer said. "My gal has ridden her all over, and I am sure she will prove the right horse for your little girl." Mr. Judson had explained that he was buying the pony for Mildred.

Three complete riding outfits were bought with the three horses.

"Now," Mr. Judson said, when all the purchases had been made, including a new milch cow that the dealer warranted to be a good milker, "you two boys can ride the horses to camp, taking turns leading Mildred's pony, while Tom and I drive the cow and the oxen. We'll load the things I bought at the store on Mildred's horse."

This was exactly what Ray and Arthur had been hoping for ever since the horses had been purchased; and hardly were the words out of Mr. Judson's mouth when each boy placed his foot in the stirrup—the three horses were already saddled and bridled—and swung himself on the back of the horse that suited his own particular taste best. Both boys were accustomed to horses and good riders, and the two ponies were well broke, and after a short preliminary gallop just to try the mettle of their mounts, they declared the horses "splendid" and were ready to begin the return trip.

On the way back to the camp Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins talked over the long journey to California, while Ray and Arthur rode on a short distance ahead, leading Mildred's pony behind them, and talking enthusiastically of the new purchases, each confident that the horse he had selected would prove the speedier when put to the test, and both loud in their praises of Mildred's pony.

"Won't Mildred be surprised and pleased," Arthur said, his eyes sparkling, "when she sees us riding into camp on the backs of two horses and leading a beautiful pony all saddled and bridled and ready for her to mount?"

"Indeed she will," Ray replied heartily. "And I fancy the very first thing she will want to do will be to get on the back of the pony and challenge us to race. You know she has often told us what a fine horseback rider she is. My, but won't her eyes sparkle and her cheeks dimple when she sees what a beautiful pony her father has bought her! I am glad Mildred is so chummy. She is almost as good as a boy."

"Almost as good as a boy!" Arthur retorted indignantly. "I think she is a whole lot better than any boy I ever knew. She isn't squealy and a 'fraid-cat like most girls, and she don't cry at every little hurt, and—and she has such a merry laugh and rosy, dimpling cheeks. No-up, I wouldn't trade Mildred for a dozen boys," he finished loyally and just a bit defiantly.

"Neither would I," Ray declared flushing. "And I didn't mean that a boy was better, only that she was almost as good as a boy to play boy-games with, and—and being a girl made her a lot better, and— Well, you know what I mean," he floundered, the red in his cheeks deepening. "Anyway, Mildred is all right and better than two dozen boys, and we'll have great fun together riding these horses."

"If Mr. Judson will only let us," Arthur broke in. "They are his own horses, and he will probably want to keep them for his own use. How I do wish I had money enough to buy this horse for my very own!" and Arthur bent forward and stroked the glossy neck of the horse he was riding. "They are all beauties, but I do think this one is a little the best of the lot—for me."

"Well, I am glad you think so," Ray laughed, "because that is exactly the way I feel about the horse I am on, as if he was the best of the bunch—for me. But what is the use? Neither of us ever had enough money to buy a horse like these. Do you know what Mr. Judson paid for the two that we are on? Two hundred and fifty dollars apiece! And three hundred dollars for Mildred's! I saw him count out the money."

"Whew!" whistled Arthur. "Looks as if I'd have to wait until I get to California and discover a gold mine before I do any investing in horse-flesh. But they

are all beauties and worth the price; and if I had two hundred and fifty dollars I'd give it in a minute for you," and he leaned forward and threw both arms around his horse's neck and pressed his cheek against the silken hair.

When Independence was reached, the goods Mr. Judson had purchased were all placed in a large gunny-sack, and then fastened on the back of Mildred's pony, and the journey back to camp resumed.

Tom Rawlins was camped about half a mile south of where our friends had pitched their tent, and parted from them shortly before they reached their camp.

"Come over to-night, Tom," Mr. Judson called, as Tom Rawlins started off with his yoke of oxen. "I want to talk over this Oregon Trail route some more with you. I've about decided to go that way."

"All right. I'll be over a little after sundown," and with a final wave of his hand to Ray and Arthur, Big Tom Rawlins continued on his way.

"I think he's great!" and Ray's eyes followed admiringly the stalwart figure of his big friend as he strode along behind his yoke of steers. "And I'll never forget how he rescued us from that bully and coward with the whip and the revolver. My, but I was scart! I was afraid that drunken brute would shoot us. He looked ugly and wicked and acted crazy enough to do anything bad. But didn't we turn the tables on him in great shape—I mean didn't Tom Rawlins? And didn't he look funny rolling down the hill in that whisky barrel? Only it won't no fun for him, just as our dancing won't no fun for us. But he deserved it," and Ray's face hardened. "And I am mighty glad I got in some good licks on him with the whip. I can still

feel the sting of his whip-lash around my legs— Hello! There comes Mildred on the run to meet us!" and the eyes of both boys turned to where Mildred, her hair streaming in wind-blown ringlets about her neck and shoulders, her cheeks red as two roses, her eyes sparkling with excitement, her bright-red dress flashing about her swiftly moving legs, was being borne toward them on feet that moved so quickly that they seemed scarcely to touch the tops of the blades of grass over which they sped.

"Whose horses are you riding? Oh, whose horses are you riding?" she called excitedly, the moment she came within voice reach. "Are they papa's horses? Did papa buy them? Oh, what a little beauty!" and she brought up, panting and almost breathless with running and excitement, by the side of her own pony.

Ray and Arthur had both stopped their horses and now sat watching the face of the excited girl, grinning joyously, but not answering a word.

"Is this pony for me? Is this pony for me? Oh, you little beauty!" and she began stroking the pony's nose which had been thrust out inquisitively toward her. "Did papa buy this pony for me? Why don't you boys say something? Why don't you answer me?" and she flashed her sparkling eyes in the direction of Ray and Arthur.

"Well, this is the first time you've given a fellow a chance," laughed Arthur. "Yes, Mr. Judson bought these horses, but I fancy he got that little fellow for Scoot to ride on. You see Scoot is almost too small to walk, and—and you and your mother will hardly want him riding with you in the waggon. Yes, I think your father bought that pony for Scoot to ride," and Arthur

tried to look as if buying three-hundred-dollar horses for little negro boys to ride was an everyday occurrence where he came from. But Mildred was not so easily fooled. For a moment she stared wonderingly and just a bit doubtfully at Arthur, and then the dimples came dancing back into her cheeks.

"Oh, you can't fool me," she laughed. "I know papa did not buy this pony for Scoot, and I just do believe he did buy her for me," and then catching sight of her father, who had now come up with the cow and the oxen, she shook her curls at Arthur and cried: "Keep your information to yourself if you want to. I'm going to headquarters for mine," and off she ran to her father, exclaiming as she ran: "Is that beautiful little horse for me, papa? Oh, is that beautiful pony for me? Tell me, quick! Did you buy that pony for me?" and she caught hold of her father's arm and began to pull as if she would pull the information right out of him.

"Well, now," Mr. Judson began deliberately, "I——"

"Papa Judson, tell me this minute," and the excited girl stamped her foot. "Tell me, is this pony mine? Yes or no."

"Sure, I——"

"She is mine! She is mine!" and Mildred was racing back to the pony; but before she reached the horse, she whirled around, ran back to her father, impulsively threw her arms around his neck, showered about a dozen kisses all over his face, including one on the end of his nose, and without taking time to utter a word, doubtless thinking the kisses sufficiently expressive, ran back to the pony.

"Oh, I must ride her, I must ride her at once!" she exclaimed. "Please take that bag of stuff off so I can get into the saddle," and she turned imperatively to Ray and Arthur.

Both boys sprang from their horses' backs, and in three minutes the sack of goods had been transferred to the back of Ray's horse, and Mildred had been swung into the saddle by her father's strong arms and was galloping off toward her mother, partly turning in her saddle and waving her hand to her father and the boys as she galloped away.

Arthur rode swiftly after her, but Ray, having the heavy sack across his saddle, was obliged to walk and lead his horse; and when he and Mr. Judson reached the camp they found Mildred and Arthur still mounted on their horses, surrounded by an admiring group made up of Mrs. Judson and Scoot and the entire Jimpson family, who had arrived during the afternoon and pitched their camp near by. Mildred was enthusiastically dilating upon the beauty and speed and easy riding of her pony, and Arthur was doing his best to get in a word now and then in praise of his own mount, while all the others, each in his or her own way, were endeavouring to express their admiration for the two horses.

"Here, Ray, come here!" shouted Arthur laughingly the moment Ray came up. "Mildred and her pony are getting all the bouquets. Come and see if we two together can't capture some of them."

"And we deserve them, too, don't we, my little beauty?—I mean you do," and stroking the glossy neck, Mildred flashed her eyes toward Ray. "She's the prettiest little horse in all the camp, and rides as easy as

sitting in a rocking-chair, and is as swift as a deer. Why," and she sat up straight in her saddle and her eyes began to dance, " I am sure she can beat both of your horses in a race, even if they are larger; and I am ready to prove it right now and here," and she threw back her head and shook her curls defiantly at Ray and Arthur.

" There's a dare for you, boys," laughed Mr. Judson. " Will you stand for it? "

" Not if you will give us permission to try," answered both boys in the same breath, their eyes beginning to kindle.

" Glad to have you try their speed," answered Mr. Judson. " And I haven't much fear of either of you leaving Dimples very far behind," he added, smiling. " She's the best horseback rider for her age, boy or girl, that I know of, if I do say it," he continued proudly. " Now let's see if everything is solid," and he carefully examined Mildred's horse and saddle to see if every strap and buckle were in fit condition for the strains of a race, while Ray and Arthur did the same with their animals and equipments.

" Fit and tight as a new drum," was Mr. Judson's comment, as he straightened up after his examination of the horse and saddle. " Now," and he glanced around, " that post over yonder will make a good place to start from," and he pointed to a post about fifty rods away that some emigrant had set in the ground. " 'Twon't be a long race, but 'twill tell which horse is the speediest as well as if it were a mile long. Now for the rules and regulations governing this contest. The race will be run from yonder post to a cord stretched between the front wheel of the waggon and the camp-fire,

and held breast-high to a horse. The first horse to touch the cord wins the race. There will be but one heat, and the start will be made from a standstill. The riders will line up their horses by the side of the post about six feet apart; and at the word 'go' from the starter each rider will do his or her level best to get his or her horse to the cord first. Are the rules and regulations understood and agreed to?" and he turned to the three children, who now sat ready on their horses, their flushed faces and sparkling eyes fixed eagerly on Mr. Judson.

"Yes," "Yes," "Yes," they agreed almost in one voice.

"Mr. Jimpson, will you do us the honour of acting as starter?"

"Cartainly," and the lank Illinoisan straightened up from the waggon-wheel against which he had been listlessly leaning. "'Twill be a right smart race, but I calk'lates that blue roan, if th' kid a-top of him knows how tew ride, will take first money. He's got th' build of a racer," and he squinted his eyes critically at the long legs of Ray's horse.

"Thank you," and Ray's face flushed happily. "I'm counting just a little on winning this race myself."

"Better not count your chickens before they are hatched," laughed Mr. Judson. "Now get to the starting-point, and we'll have the thing settled in about three jerks to one lamb's tail. It's up to you, Dimples, to take some of the conceit out of them two young gents. Don't disappoint your old dad," he called after Mildred, as, accompanied by Ray and Arthur, she galloped off to the post, followed by Jud Jimpson, while Mr. Judson tied a small white cord to the

waggon-wheel, and walking over to the camp-fire, stood holding it ready for the coming of the horses.

In a few minutes Mildred and the two boys had their horses in line by the side of the post, and sat waiting the word "go" from the starter, the three horses showing almost as much interest and excitement as did the children themselves.

"Now," and Mildred bent forward and stroked the arched neck of her pony, "you are going to win this race for me, aren't you, my little beauty?"

The pony pricked up her ears as if listening, nodded her head as if in answer to Mildred's question, and began champing her bit as if impatient to prove to her young mistress how worthy she was of her words of praise.

"Did you see her nod her head?" cried the delighted girl. "I do believe she understood what I was saying. Oh, we'll teach that blue roan of yours a thing or two about racing," and she glanced archly at Ray, who sat on his horse to the right of her, with Arthur on the left.

"Better take your father's advice and not count your chickens until they are hatched," suggested Ray, laughing. "Long legs do count a lot in a race, and I am glad that I am on the back of just the horse that I am."

"Wait and see! Just wait and see!" and Mildred shook her curls defiantly and tightened her grip on the bridle-rein, and settled herself firmly in the saddle, ready for the first jump of her horse that would mean so much in a short race like this.

"Ready!" and Jud Jimpson glanced along the breasts of the three horses to see that all were in line.

"Here, pull yer hoss back 'bout six inches," he called to Arthur.

Arthur jerked his horse back, and both boys tightened their grip on their bridle-reins, leaned slightly forward in their saddles, and fixed their eyes on the goal.

"One!—Two!—Three!—Go!!!" yelled Jud Jimpson, jumping wildly up into the air and swinging his hat at the word "go!"

As if the trigger of a catapult had been suddenly pulled behind each, the three horses leaped forward; but by the fraction of a second, Mildred's pony leaped first, while at the same time she got her speed quicker than did either of the other horses, and before they had gone ten rods she was leading the other two by a good rod.

"Bully girl! Keep her going! You've got them beat!" shouted the excited and delighted Mr. Judson. "Ah!—Don't let them get ahead of you! Let her out another notch!" he yelled, as he saw the horses of Ray and Arthur slowly drawing nearer and nearer to Mildred's pony, until they were almost abreast of her.

At that moment, as if in answer to Mr. Judson's warning cry, the pony seemed to crouch lower and then to shoot ahead of the other two horses; and the next instant Mildred, with hair and red dress flying, flashed by the goal, a full dozen feet ahead of Ray and Arthur, whose horses ran so nearly abreast that it was impossible to tell which was in the lead.

"Oh, but isn't she a beauty? Isn't she a little beauty?" cried the happy girl as, flushed with excitement and victory, she rode back to where her father stood. "And I think you are the best papa ever girl had to give her to me."

"Let's try it again and have the race longer," pleaded Arthur, riding eagerly up. "I am sure my horse would beat them."

"Yes, do," joined in Ray. "I feel certain my horse would win in a long race."

"I am ready," Mildred flashed back, shaking her curls.

"No, no," laughed Mr. Judson, "we'll have no more racing to-day. Off your horses the three of you. I've a surprise coming for somebody that is about due to happen now, and I want you to help me get ready for it at once."

"Oh!" and Mildred jumped from her horse. "What is it? Tell me, Papa Judson."

"Sure, I want to talk it over with you and your mother right now. Here, Scoot, hold Mildred's pony," and he handed the bridle-rein to the little negro boy. "Excuse us, boys. Come on, Dimples," and with merry twinkles in his eyes Mr. Judson, with Mildred dancing along by his side, hurried to where Mrs. Judson was standing a little apart from the others, apparently awaiting them.

Ray and Arthur stared after them, more than a little mystified by the words and actions of Mr. Judson and the behaviour of the Jimpson family, who stood staring expectantly at the two boys and grinning as if something delightful was about to happen. Apparently all had been informed as to the nature of this coming "surprise" except the two boys, and they wondered why.

"What's up now?" and Ray turned to Arthur. The two boys stood close together holding their horses by the bridle-reins. "Just see that grin on Jud Jimpson's

face. Looks as if he was expecting something to drop that would taste good, don't he?"

"Shouldn't wonder if it was something that would taste good," Arthur replied. "Something that Mr. Judson bought while he was in Independence. But say, Mildred can ride, can't she? And that pony of hers is a jim-dandy; but I really don't believe she can beat this horse in a long race," and he turned and threw one arm affectionately over his pony's lowered neck. "You are the best horse in seventeen States, and I'd give anything, anything, if you were really and truly my own."

"Look, Art," Ray whispered excitedly. "The show is about to begin, and we seem to be the centre of attraction, for Mildred and her mother are both headed our way, and the rest are all staring and grinning at us. What can it be?" and the two boys watched with wondering eyes the approach of Mrs. Judson and Mildred.

Mildred, with dimples coming and going in each cheek and eyes sparkling with suppressed excitement, walked straight up to Ray.

"I'll take this horse, sir," she said, and reaching out her hand, she caught the bridle-rein from Ray's fingers, who was too astonished to say anything and stood staring blankly at her.

"Allow me to relieve you of this horse, sir," and Mrs. Judson took the rein from Arthur's hand, and without another word walked away with the horse, leaving Arthur staring open-mouthed after her.

Mrs. Judson walked perhaps a rod, then she turned round and stood facing Arthur. Almost at the same moment Mildred, leading the horse she had taken from Ray, joined her, and turning, also faced the boys.

"Wife," and Mr. Judson cleared his throat, took a step forward, and gave one arm an oratorical fling upward, "wife and daughter, it now becomes your pleasant duty to show two brave boys how much, how very much you owe to them, and that you have not forgotten your debt." Again Mr. Judson paused to clear his throat, and there was a bit of moisture in his eyes as he continued: "Now, Cat and Dimples, you just finish this speech for me. I'm no good at speechifying."

Mildred glanced at her mother and smiled; Mrs. Judson smiled back and nodded; and then Mildred started with the horse she was leading straight for Ray, and Mrs. Judson led her horse directly up to Arthur, while Mr. Judson and the whole Jimpson family crowded nearer expectantly.

"Ray," and Mildred's voice trembled, "when I was drowning in the Mississippi River after that terrible, terrible accident"—and she shuddered and grew white at the recollection of the awful disaster—"you—you saved my life at the risk of your own, and I will never, never forget it as long as I live. Now," and she smiled through her tears while the dimples and roses came back into her cheeks, "papa has made me very, very happy by giving me the chance to—to— Oh, I wish I knew how to say it right— But you will understand what I mean, Ray. Papa wishes me to give you this horse to be your very own, for—for saving me. I— Here, take him. He is yours," and the happy girl thrust the bridle-rein into Ray's hand.

"It's not to pay you, my boy. It's not to pay you," and Jed Judson stepped forward and gripped Ray's hand and shook it warmly. "Mildred's worth more than all the horses that ever walked on four legs. It's

just to show you that Jed Judson don't forget a thing like that," and giving Ray's hand another hearty shake, he hurried to Arthur, to whom Mrs. Judson, her motherly face glowing with smiles, had presented the horse she was leading, and then had thrown her arms around his neck and kissed him, even as she had done on board the *Lady Belle*.

"Don't think that I am trying to pay you in horseflesh for saving the best woman God ever gave to a man for a wife," Mr. Judson cried, catching hold of Arthur's hand and shaking it nearly off his arm. "It's just a sort of reminder that I'm not forgetting what I owe to you. Now—" But here he was interrupted by Jud Jimpson, who doubtless thought it was time that he and his numerous family were showing their approval of the whole proceeding.

"Yunks, everybody!" he shouted, grabbing off his hat and swinging it around his head. "Three cheers for them boys! 'Twas a brave deed they did. Hip! Hip! Hip! Hurrah! Hurrah!! HURRAH!!!" and Jud Jimpson swung his hat at the full length of his long arm and yelled at the full strength of his piercing voice, while the Jimpson family, little and big, seconded his efforts most heartily and noisily, and even Mr. and Mrs. Judson and Mildred and Scoot added their voices to swell the cheers that went rolling over the prairie and caused many an emigrant to look in their direction and to wonder what was going on.

Some fifteen minutes later, when all the excitement had quieted down, Mildred and Ray and Arthur stood a little apart from the others, talking together about their horses and how surprised they were to get them.

"Now," and Mildred clapped her hands joyfully,

" I know what we will do to end this celebration. We'll christen our horses. I want to name my own pony, and I am sure you boys want to name yours. Wait. I'll get the water," and she ran to the water-pail and filled a small tin basin with water, and hurried back with it to where the boys stood near the horses.

" Here, you hold the basin while I christen mine. I know what I am going to name her," and she handed the basin of water to Ray. " There, that is just right. Hold it right there," and Mildred stood in front of her pony and dipped her fingers into the water and said, " I name thee Beauty "; and then suddenly withdrawing her hand from the basin, she sprinkled the water adhering to it over the pony's forehead. " And Beauty henceforth and forevermore shall be your name," she finished, laughing and taking the basin from Ray. " Now christen yours," and she turned to the boys, who entered most heartily into the amusing ceremony.

Ray's pony was duly and solemnly christened " Getthere," " because," as Ray explained, " he looks as if he would always be able to get there, and I am sure his acts won't go back on his looks." Arthur christened his horse "Black Duke," "because his colour is almost coal black, and I am certain he's at least a duke among horses." And as Beauty and Getthere and Black Duke the three ponies were known thereafter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JUD JIMPSON'S ASH-MAP

TOM RAWLINS came over to the Judson camp that night a little after sundown as he had promised, and he and Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson sat down near the camp-fire, with Mildred and her mother and the two boys and Scoot sitting a little in the background, to talk over the long trip to California and to plan how best it could be made. Mr. Judson had discovered a prize in Jud Jimpson, who, before he married and took to civilised ways, had been a Western hunter and had hunted all through the section traversed by the Oregon Trail, and had been over the trail itself several times and twice to Great Salt Lake, and once he and a companion had gone clear through to California and hunted for a month, as near as he could judge from what he heard, through the very region where the gold had been since discovered; and consequently both Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins rejoiced greatly to have him join their council.

The three men sat and talked and considered and planned until late in the night, while the boys and Mildred listened, fascinated by what they heard of the long journey they were about to make through a strange and unknown land, where Nature yet remained unchanged by the hand of man, and where deers and buffalos and

wolves and bears and the hardly less savage and wild Indians made their homes.

Jud Jimpson was the only one of the three men that had ever been over the trail, but he, as Mr. Judson said afterward, "was chuck full of information," and gave it out freely. He was a "natural-born" hunter; and when he quit hunting and went to Illinois, married, and settled down to farming, he was almost as much out of his element as a fish would be out of water, and about as successful in getting a living, as the condition of himself and family plainly told. But now, with the glowing camp-fire in front of him, the darkness of night around him, and willing ears to listen to his hunting adventures, he was exactly in his element; and no man ever had a more attentive audience than he did, as he described the country through which they would soon be passing, the various tribes of Indians they would meet, the kinds of game they would find, and the hardships they might be called upon to endure. Indeed, so interested were all in what he was saying that it was long past midnight before the circle around the camp-fire broke up and Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson returned to their camp and the Judson party to their blankets.

However, three important matters had been definitely settled at this camp-fire council: 1st, they would go to California by way of the Oregon Trail; 2d, they would start on the journey early on the morning of the following Monday; 3d, and most important, they would all go together, Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins agreeing to properly outfit Jud Jimpson in consideration of his acting as guide and hunter for the entire party. Tom Rawlins was to move his camp early the next morning to within a short distance of the

others, so that the boys could keep an eye on it during the day; and then the three men were to go to Independence to buy a couple of yokes of oxen and the other things needed to put the Jimpson outfit in shape for travelling. Monday was but two days off, and consequently the intervening Saturday, the only working day, would be a busy day for all hands, for everything in the three outfits had to be overhauled to see if it was in proper condition for the long journey, and the waggons repacked.

Fortunately Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins had already purchased all their supplies, and as their outfits were entirely new, there was little to be done to them to get them in readiness for the start, so that the energies of all could be concentrated on getting the outfit of Jud Jimpson in shape; and when Saturday night came and the darkness again settled down over the prairie, Jud Jimpson was the proud possessor of an almost entirely new outfit. His worn-out oxen had been sold, and two yokes of vigorous young steers had been purchased; his waggon had been completely overhauled, and everything in and about it made ready for the journey; and his larder had been replenished with many pounds of flour and bacon and other sadly needed supplies, while Mrs. Judson and Mildred had been busy nearly every moment of the day getting the clothing of Mrs. Jimpson and the children in better condition.

Ray and Arthur had nearly worn their legs off running back and forth between the three waggons and attending to the oxen and horses and doing a multitude of other needed things; and when night came and they were at liberty to throw themselves down on the soft

folds of their blankets before the cheerful glow of the camp-fire, they were two very tired as well as happy boys, for the day had been one constant round of excitement and interest to them as well as of work.

Even Scoot had been kept busy every moment of the day, and had clearly proven his late master a falsifier, for if he had any lazy bones in his little black body, not one of them had been in evidence during the day, while his cheerful comicalities had added greatly to the gaiety of all. Indeed, dressed in his new suit of blue jeans that Mr. Judson had bought for him in Independence, and with face and hands and hair as clean as soap and water could make them, he appeared altogether a different fellow from the ragged, dirty, disreputable-looking little black piccaninny that had so startled Mildred only a couple of nights before.

That night, when all had gathered around the camp-fire, Jud Jimpson, whose transformation from a listless, shiftless emigrant into an alert, resourceful hunter had been almost as marvellous as that through which Scoot had passed, spread out several handfuls of white ashes on a smooth spot of ground, and with a pointed stick traced in the ashes a rough map of the route over which they would travel as far as Salt Lake City, that wonderful city which the Mormons had so recently established in the wilderness near Great Salt Lake.

"Now we'll let this point stand for Independence, where we be now," and Jud Jimpson thrust the point of his stick into the southeastern edge of his little plot of ashes. "Th' trail runs northwesterly 'bout like this," and he drew a nearly straight line diagonally across the plot of ashes in a northwesterly direction, "clear through tew Fort Laramie, which is nigh seven hundred

miles from where we be now an' th' last post east of th' Rockies; an' continues on in th' same gineral direction for somethin' like fifty miles further, when it runs up 'g'inst th' Wind River Mountains 'bout like this," and with numerous short scratches he indicated a short range of mountains extending almost directly east and west; "an' turns an' goes west 'long th' Sweet Water Valley, through th' Devil's Gate, an' over th' Great Divide of th' Rockies by way of th' South Pass, which is somethin' over nine hundred miles from where we be now."

Here Jud paused to make a long series of short scratches in the ashes, running north and south of the point where he had indicated the South Pass to be.

"Them's th' Rockies," he said by way of explanation, pointing to the scratches, "an' 'long right here," and his stick rested on the South Pass, "is where th' backbone of this here continent runs, an' a mighty rough an' rocky backbone it is. But once through th' South Pass an' a-top th' Great Divide, th' trail soon begins tew go down an' th' water in th' streams tew flow westward to'rd th' Pacific, 'stead of eastward to'rd th' Atlantic, an' th' trail does considerable twistin' an' windin' down th' Pacific slope, through valleys an' canyons tew Fort Bridger; an' thence down through th' valley of th' Bear River an' a lot of other valleys an' canyons, in a southwesterly direction, tew Great Salt Lake, where th' Mormons have started their city, which I reckon is somethin' atween thirteen an' fourteen hundred miles from here, an' 'bout two-thirds of th' way tew Californy."

As Jud Jimpson thus briefly outlined the trail to Great Salt Lake, he had traced it on the plot of ashes

with his pointed stick. He now made an irregular circle in the ashes, which he explained stood for Great Salt Lake, and a little to the east of the south end of this circle he scratched a cross to represent Salt Lake City.

"There, that's 'bout where th' City of th' Saints is, accordin' tew my reckonin'," he continued. "An' now, bein' that we've got th' trail laid out far as Great Salt Lake, I'll go back an' give you somethin' of an idee of what sort of a country it runs through, so that you'll get an idee of what sort of a thing you're up ag'inst. 'Twon't be no picnic excursion, but somethin' over two thousand miles of th' roughest an' toughest travellin' God ever gave a man tew do afore you reach Californy.

"Now," and again the point of the stick rested on the spot that stood for Independence on the ash-map, "from here tew th' Platte River, 'bout three hundred miles, th' trail runs through a sort of rollin' prairie-like country, cut by deep ravines worn by th' water, with high bluffs 'long th' rivers, an' plenty of water an' grass, if th' gold-seekers ain't ate an' drank it all up. Looks as if all creation an' his wife an' yunks had started for Californy," and Jud Jimpson paused and glanced around at the hundreds of glowing camp-fires of the big encampment. "Well, I reckon th' West is big enough for all. But as I was a-sayin', th' trail tew th' waters of th' Platte won't have no hardships worth speakin' of, an' there won't be much danger from th' Injuns, bein' that th' Delawares an' Sauks an' Pawnees an' other tribes atween here an' th' Platte are tew civilised tew be good for much of anythin' but drinkin' forty-rod whisky an' stealin'; but Jumpin' Moses, how them red vermint will steal!—hosses, cattle, grub,

anythin' they can lay their dirty hands on, even tew th' teeth out of your head if ye don't keep your mouths shut," and he glared at Scoot who sat listening with mouth agape and ivories glistening in the firelight. With a startled "Golly!" the negro clapped his hand over his lips and shut his mouth tight, and henceforth only the rolling of his eyes showed his absorbing interest in what Jud Jimpson was saying.

"But won't we find any buffalos and deers and bears along the trail?" Ray inquired anxiously, taking advantage of the pause that followed the laugh caused by the sudden eclipse of Scoot's shining ivories. "I thought the West was full of buffalos, and that deers and antelopes were as common as sheep and cows in the East."

"Buffalos!" and Jud Jimpson made a comprehensive sweep with his pointed stick to the northwest. "Well, I've seen them prairies black with buffalos, an' spotted with deers and antelopes, an' th' lakes an' rivers jest 'bout covered with ducks an' geese, an' quails an' prairie-hens an' jackass-rabbits so thick you couldn't throw a stone anywhere without killin' one or t'other."

"Oh! Oh!" exclaimed Ray and Arthur in a delighted chorus. "We'll live on buffalo steak and venison and ducks, and——"

"Jest hold your hosses," and Jud shook his stick at the two boys. "They're gettin' some rambunctuous, an' need pullin' up. I said I seen 'em, but that ain't sayin' you'll see 'em. This here string of squeakin' waggins, an' yellin' men an' women an' yunks, an' whinnerin', bellerin', brayin' hosses an' oxen an' mules, stretchin' clean from here tew Californy, is enough tew give every buffalo an' deer in them valleys a headache,

an' stampede 'em all north an' south; where they can chew their cuds in quietness an' peace. An' as for b'ar, any self-respectin' b'ar wouldn't be seen within a mile of th' trail," and the old hunter looked his disgust as he thought of the havoc this tumultuous exodus of Philistines through his old hunting-grounds would make with the game.

"And then we won't see any buffalo and deer and bears," complained Arthur dolefully.

"I ain't sayin' that, I ain't sayin' that. I reckon afore we gets tew Californy we'll see a-plenty of all them critters; but 'twon't be as it used tew be, 'twon't be as it used tew be," he repeated regretfully. "An' we'll have tew get away from th' trail tew find th' big game; but I'll promise you boys a chance tew try your guns on buffalos an' deers an' maybe a b'ar or tew afore we gets tew Californy, in spite of all these gol-danged lunatics, who 'pear tew think goin' tew Californy 'cross th' plains an' mountains is a sort of a Sunday-school picnic.

"Now," and the stick returned to the trail marked on the ash-map, "let me continue tew show you what them idjits are up 'g'inst. Th' trail follows 'long th' Platte Valley clear up tew th' Red Buttes, which is somethin' over a hundred miles beyond Fort Laramie an' nigh seven hundred and fifty miles from here; an' it ain't no turnpike with bridges 'cross th' streams an' th' steep spots made level, but jest as God made it, cut by deep gullies an' ravines, crossed by little an' big an' swift an' slow streams of water, an' up an' down steep hills. Sometimes you've got tew lower th' waggin with ropes down th' side of a steep ravine, then ag'in you've got tew push an' pull an' haul it up steep hills, an' 'cross

rivers, like as not gettin' upset or stuck in th' river, an' gettin' into th' water an' mud up tew your neck. An' then there's th' wind an' rain storms, when th' wind blows so hard 'twill blow th' ha'r off a dog's back, an' th' water comes down like as if God A'mighty had pulled th' bottom out of one of them lakes up in Heaven an' let th' hull down ker-flop. No, 'twon't be no Sunday-school picnic excursion," and Jud Jimpson paused to indicate on his map the spot where Fort Laramie stood and the course of the Platte and various other rivers.

"When we gets tew th' Red Buttes we gets tew th' mountains," he continued, when through with his map-making; "an' th' road gets rougher an' worser, but th' scenery is great. I reckon God A'mighty felt like doin' big things when He made them mountains an' canyons an' swift rivers a-tumblin' over rocks an' down precipices; but th' scenery bein' grand don't make it any easier travellin', an' it's a tough road, hard on th' men, harder on th' waggins, an' hardest on th' oxen, all th' way over th' Rockies an' down th' t'other side, clean tew th' Great Salt Lake; an' when we gets there we'll know somethin' 'bout what it means tew go by ox-team tew Californy, but we won't know th' worse. Th' worst bit of th' trail comes in atween Great Salt Lake an' th' gold-diggin's; for, as I remember it, it's mostly mountains an' canyons an' barren, waterless, God-forsaken tracts of alkali deserts; but we'll be toughened tew it by that time, an' I reckon we'll pull through all right.

"No, this here goin' tew Californy in a waggin won't be no picnic; but 'twill be somethin' better. 'Twill make us all tough an' hard as nails; 'twill fill

our lungs full of God's pure air an' our eyes full of th' sights of God's Great Country an' our hearts full of freedom an' inderpendence, for there every man be his own king an' president, an' rules by th' rights of his own manhood," and Jud Jimpson's eyes kindled and his lank form straightened. "Why, I feel like a fellow that's been in jail an' jest got out when I looks toward them great plains an' valleys an' mountains. No more stiff-collar, white-shirt civilisation, with houses with stoves in 'em crowdin' together so thick you can see a half a dozen of 'em all tew once, for me. Th' rifle, not th' plough; th' huntin'-knife, not th' axe; th' freedom of th' great plains an' th' mountains, not th' four walls of a house full of bad smells of cookin' an' such; them's th' things that makes a man a man; them's th' things that makes life worth th' livin'." As he spoke his eyes were turned toward the great Northwest, and for the moment he forgot his present surroundings; then with a laugh he came back to the little camp-fire and the circle of wondering faces, kindling with something of his own wild enthusiasm.

"Well, I reckon I've been doin' a little oratin'," he said, his face flushing; "but th' thought of them great plains an' mountains got my blood tew jumpin' an' I jest had tew do a little spoutin'. Now ye have somethin' of an idee what th' trail's like," and he sat down.

For an hour longer the talk around the camp-fire continued, during which many eager questions were asked by the boys and the others concerning the route and answered by Jud Jimpson, and then all turned to their blankets for the repose all needed so greatly.

"By the way, boys, who do you think we saw in

Independence to-day?" Mr. Judson asked, as he rolled himself up in his blanket near the camp-fire.

"Don't know," Ray replied sleepily.

"That black-leg gambler, Slim George, that we marooned coming down the Ohio. 'Pears to me," he added suspiciously, "he's taking a lot of interest in my doings. He got on the boat the same time I did, and he's followed me ever since. Wonder if he can know anything about—" and he stopped abruptly, remembering that the boys knew nothing of the iron-bound money-chest and its contents.

"About what?" Arthur inquired, half raising himself in his blanket. "Ray and I saw him the day we were there and meant to tell you, but forgot. Shouldn't wonder if he was bound for California, too."

"I reckon you're right. Anyway, it's time we shut our mouths and eyes. Good-night," and Mr. Judson rolled over in his blanket and closed his eyes, and soon all were sound asleep, except Tom Rawlins, who was to keep the first three-hours' watch over the three camps, for ever since the attempt to rob Mr. Judson's waggon, a guard had been kept during the sleeping hours of the night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"THIS WAGGON IS BOUND TO GO CLEAR THROUGH TO THE SACRAMENTO"

"GET up! Rout out, everybody! Ho, for California!" shouted Mr. Judson early Monday morning, as he leaped up from his blankets. "The Great Day, the Momentous Hour has come! Ho, for the gold mines! Ho, for California! Everybody get up!"

Ray and Arthur leaped to their feet, Mildred stuck her head, all rumpled curls and smiles and dimples, out of the tent opening, Scoot jumped up from under the waggon, where he had made his bed, and all joined in the shout: "Ho, for California!"

A few minutes later and the "women folks" were busily engaged in getting breakfast, while the men and the boys attended to the making ready of the horses and oxen for the beginning of their long journey.

Our friends had passed Sunday quietly. In the morning, after the necessary work had been done, Ray and Arthur and Mildred had "fixed up" in their "best" clothes, and followed by Scoot, had wandered about the great encampment, interested and amused by the novel scenes they witnessed. As a rule, all except needful work was suspended, and the emigrants, dressed in clean, neat clothing, lounged about the waggons and tents,

talking "trade" in subdued undertones, or discussing the ever-interesting latest news from California, or sauntered about from camp to camp swapping news and stories.

A little after noon a man had climbed up on top of a waggon and had blown a horn, announcing that the religious service, notices of which had been previously circulated about the encampment, was about to begin. The preacher stood on a feed-box turned bottom side up, and behind him sat, on boards supported by boxes, five or six women, wives and daughters of the emigrants, and a dozen or more men, forming the choir; and never did costly voices in stately churches sound more sweetly or reverently than did those that rose heavenward through the clear, pure, prairie air of that bright June day; and never had minister a more motley or a more attentive audience.

When evening came all had again gathered around the camp-fire, and Mrs. Judson and Mildred, both of whom were blessed with beautiful voices that had been well trained, had sang old home-songs; and the thought of home was in the hearts of all, and all spoke in low, subdued voices, and moved quietly about the camp-fire, for they were about to leave all that stood for home and the home life behind, and go forth into the unknown wilderness of plains and valleys and mountains, with its mysteries and difficulties and dangers; and the thought of what all this might mean was in every heart, and no one felt very much like joking, and when bed-time came all had gone to their blankets with something of the same feeling a youth has when, for the last time before striking out for himself in the great unknown world, he goes to his little room to take what

well may be his last night's rest on the bed whereon he has slept for so many years. They were about to bid adieu to all the familiar scenes and things of civilisation, and not one of them could foresee what dangers and hardships and sufferings were before them. But in the clear, cool air of the early morning all these saddening thoughts and gloomy forebodings had vanished; and the children's glad, "Ho, for California!" had found a joyous echo in every heart.

The breakfast that morning was hurriedly eaten, amid much excited talk; and then the cook-stove was lifted to its place in the waggon, where the tent and its belonging had already been placed, the cow tied to the tail-board of Mr. Judson's waggon, the oxen yoked to the waggons, and the horses saddled and bridled ready for their riders. This done, the three men caught up their ox-whips, Mrs. Judson and Mrs. Jimpson, with her baby in her arms and her two youngest children by her side, climbed upon the front seats of their waggons, Ray and Arthur and Mildred leaped upon the backs of their horses, Scoot and Sally, the oldest Jimpson girl, fell in by their sides—and the moment for the actual start had come.

"Everybody ready?" and Mr. Judson gave a farewell glance about.

"Ay!" "Ay!" answered Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson.

Mr. Judson gripped the short staff of his whip with both hands, swung the long lash around his head, and with the shout, "Ho, for the gold mines of California!" sent the lash hurtling through the air and cracked its snapper with a pistol-like report between the ears of his foreward yoke of oxen; and the three

waggons, with the oxen straining at their yokes, swung into line, Jud Jimpson, by virtue of his being the guide, taking the lead, Mildred and Ray and Arthur, with Scoot and Sally Jimpson trotting along after them, coming next, then Mr. Judson, and last Tom Rawlins, with his waggon, which, in a fit of seeming temporary insanity, he had painted a bright red, cover, box, gearing, wheels, and all.

"Well, we're off at last," Ray said, his eyes sparkling. "Now for the great plains and valleys and mountains and Indians and bears and buffalos and deers, and then the gold mines! Oh, we'll have a great time, won't we, Getthere?" and he leaned forward and stroked his horse's neck, a glorious picture of vigorous boyish enthusiasm.

"Good-bye, houses and soft beds and stores and all such things," and Arthur waved his hand a bit melodramatically toward all the great East. "We're off for the Wild West, where the roof of our house will be the glorious skies, its walls all outdoors, and its foundations the solid old earth. Now for California and the gold mines!" and he turned his face westward toward the golden Eldorado of his dreams.

Mildred spoke no words of good-bye, but she turned in her saddle and looked long eastward, her face saddening and her eyes filling; and then slowly lifting her finger-tips to her lips, she threw a kiss of farewell to the East and all that it meant to her, and resolutely faced the great unknown West.

Many of the emigrants had chosen that bright June morning to make their start Californiaward, and a long line of white-topped waggons was already slowly rolling westward across the undulating prairie and

vanishing in the far distance over the brow of a low hill. Other slower ones were eagerly making ready for the start, and these greeted our friends as they passed by with shouts that they would soon be with them, and with witticisms and boastful offers to wager that they would yet beat them to the gold mines. Those who were not yet ready to start looked longingly after the long procession of adventurers winding its way westward, and shouted words of cheer and waved their hats and handkerchiefs in farewell.

And now behind our friends lay the little City of Tents, and beyond them stretched the winding trail—into what mysteries, difficulties, and dangers who could tell? But they passed right bravely on, for beyond that far Western horizon were the things that youth and manhood, ay, and womanhood, ever love—gold and adventure, the opportunity to do and to dare, to win for one's self fame and fortune, to make a place in the great working world.

"Now it's California sure or bust," Ray said as they turned from their last look toward the encampment and rode slowly down the ridge of hills that seemed to rise like a wall between them and the scenes and things of civilised life.

"Sure!" Arthur responded, laughing. "That is what was painted on the cover of one of the waggons we just passed; and judging from the looks of the outfit, 'twill be 'bust.'"

"Oh, we must have a motto painted on our waggon-cover!" Mildred exclaimed. "Almost everybody has. What shall it be?"

"How would 'Root, hog, or die' do?" Ray suggested, smiling. "I saw that painted on a cover a ways

back, and it struck me as a good motto—for the fellows who had it," he added. "They looked as if they had already begun to 'root.'"

"Well, I'm no pig if you are a hog," Mildred laughed. "I don't mean that kind of a motto, but something real nice, like 'Where there's a will there's a way, even to California,' or 'Perseverance conquers all,' only let's make it all up ourselves. Now what shall it be?" and her smooth forehead puckered itself all up into thought-wrinkles.

"We're going through if it takes both legs," proposed Ray.

"We've got the 'will' and we'll find the 'way'—to California," suggested Arthur.

"This waggon is bound to go clear through to the Sacramento," came from Mildred as the result of the thought-puckers.

"A poet and we didn't know it," laughed Ray. "But that really is a bully good motto, Mildred; for this waggon certainly is bound to go clear through to the Sacramento if we have to pull it ourselves. Let's paint that on the cover to-night when we camp. What do you say, Art?"

"The very thing. I couldn't have done it better myself," assented Arthur merrily. "Mildred, you're a poet, and I don't care who knows it— Oh, just see what that fellow has got on his waggon!" and he pointed to where a huge, heavily loaded prairie-schooner, drawn by five yokes of coal-black oxen, had stopped a little to one side of the trail. "I'd just as lief travel with a graveyard as with that thing on my waggon-cover."

They were now abreast of the waggon, and could plainly read on its white cover scrawled in letters a

foot long the words: "CALEFORNY OR," followed by a rudely drawn, yet gruesomely real-looking, coffin.

"Ugh! Makes me feel creep-a-crawly just to look at it, while the black oxen look as if they had already gone into mourning." And Mildred, with a shrug of disgust, turned her eyes away. "I hope they won't travel near us. I am sure something dreadful would happen if they should," and she kept her face turned from the waggon.

"Hope ye ain't stoppin' tew dig your grave yet, neighbour," Jud Jimpson sang out cheerily as he tramped by.

"Not on your life," answered one of the three men lying on the ground in front of the waggon. "That there 'lustrated motto's jest tew tell folks that nothin' this side of th' grave can stop us. What might ye be totin' across th' plains in that there red waggon, stranger?" and he turned to Tom Rawlins with his flame-coloured waggon. "Hope 'tain't got th' scarlet fever, 'cause that's catchin'."

"Well, whatever it's got, 'tain't catching," retorted Tom Rawlins good-naturedly. "You see, I had to paint them red steers white," and he pointed to his three yokes of red steers, "or that white waggon red, to make the colour scheme harmonise, me being artistic-natured; and I reckoned 'twould be easier to paint the waggon than the critters. See?— Haw, there, Buster!" and the long lash of his ox-whip cracked within an inch of the right ear of his off forward ox.

This badinage of good-natured witticisms between different parties of emigrants as they met or passed one another on the plains was a constant source of amusement and cheer. Introductions were not needed.

Strangers met with friendly greetings and parted with a joke or stingless gibe. This was the pleasant etiquette of the great plains, the cheerful hospitality of the wild life, where strangers were treated as friends until proven enemies and not as enemies until proven friends.

The camp that first day was made early, about three o'clock in the afternoon, on the summit of a little hill that rose from the banks of a small stream of water, and half a mile off the main trail, where the grass had not yet been eaten by the cattle of the emigrants. The three waggons were drawn up in a half circle, the cattle unyoked, watered, and hobbled where they could feed on the rich prairie-grass, the ponies unsaddled and unbridled and staked out near the waggons, the tents pitched within the circle, the camp-fire built in front of the tents; and then our friends proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible for an hour or so, for all were tired, wearied with the unaccustomed labour of walking or riding in the hot June sun.

"Now let's try our hands on Mildred's motto," Arthur said, something like an hour later, rising a bit stiffly from the grass in the shade of the waggon, where the children had been resting their limbs, stiffened by their long horseback ride.

There was no paint, but the tar-bucket, which swung from under every emigrant's waggon, was brought into requisition, and the black, vicious substance answered very well as a substitute.

Ray painted the motto on one side of the waggon-cover, and then Arthur tried his skill on the other side, while Mildred and Scoot and the older Jimpson children formed a sort of an advisory committee, and stood



Ray Painted the Motto on One Side of the Wagon-cover, and then Arthur Tried his Skill on the Other Side.

by freely offering them their advice and help. Both boys "painted" big, and thereafter Jedidiah Judson's waggon boldly asserted in letters half a foot long to all who might care to read:

> This waggon is bound to go
> Clear through to the Sacramento.

"Them's my sentiments, too," Mr. Judson said, laughing, after he had slowly read the motto. "No turning back, once you put your hand to the plough, until the furrow is finished. No backing out, once you start, until you reach the end started for. Yes, I reckon this waggon is bound to go clear through to the Sacramento. Hey, Scoot?" and he turned to the little negro boy who stood near admiring the lettering.

"I done reckon he am," Scoot replied, scratching his wool-kinks and rolling his eyes toward Mr. Judson. "What am dat Sac'mento?"

"That's the place where gold is found in the ground like potatoes by digging," Mr. Judson answered, smiling, "and everybody can have all that he can dig up."

"Golly!" and Scoot's eyes opened wide. "Yo' can dig up gold dar same as 'taters in Kentuck?"

Mr. Judson nodded.

"An' don't hab to gib dat gold to nobody but yo'self?"

Again Mr. Judson nodded.

"Den dis niggah's gwine to hab er mighty big cellah fo' dem gold 'taters."

There was a loud laugh at Scoot's characteristic reply; and before it quieted down the little piccanniny had vanished behind one of the waggons in pursuit of

a gaudily coloured butterfly that had boldly flitted by in front of his face.

An almost continuous stream of emigrants was passing along the trail westward, and Mildred and the two boys soon wandered down nearer to the trail where they could see them plainer. It was a curious and an interesting sight. There were all kinds of vehicles, drawn by all kinds of draught animals, and accompanied by all kinds of human beings, big and little, old and young, native and foreign. Here a huge prairie-schooner, loaded with a store-load of goods and overflowing with women and children, creaked slowly along, drawn it might be by half a dozen or more yokes of oxen, and followed possibly by a small, two-wheeled, covered go-cart drawn by a single mule or horse, with the owner sitting complacently on the narrow seat in front. But by far the greater number of the emigrants put their trust in the strong, cloth-covered waggon, known as a prairie-schooner, drawn by sturdy yokes of oxen; and usually they had no cause to regret this trust, for in the long run oxen proved themselves superior either to horses or mules for the long, steady pull across the barren plains and over the Rocky Mountains to California.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred sat on a little mound of grass, a dozen rods away, and watched this odd procession of adventurous gold-seekers pass for an hour or more; and were just about to start back to camp when their eyes caught sight of a huge waggon, drawn by five yokes of great black oxen, slowly coming along over the trail.

"Hello, here comes The Mourners!" exclaimed Arthur, pointing to the coffin already visible on the cover

of the approaching waggon. "I'd feel hoodooed if I had to travel with that outfit, black oxen and coffin and all."

"And the men are sort of gloomy-looking, too," Ray observed. "See how solemn and stately that tall fellow marches along by the side of the oxen, as if he were in a funeral procession."

"Well, I don't wonder he looks solemn," Mildred declared, "with that black-coffined thing creeping along behind him. I'd walk clear to California before I'd ride a step in that waggon."

The Mourners, as Arthur had aptly called them, passed slowly by, the waggon creaking and the ten great black oxen straining at their yokes, while the three men, tall, sallow-faced, gloomy-featured fellows, stalked solemnly along by their sides.

"I declare that fellow means to take it easy!" exclaimed Arthur a few moments later, pointing back along the trail to where a light spring waggon, newly covered and drawn by a pair of swift-limbed mules, was rolling merrily along over the prairie.

The mules were driven on a trot, and in a few minutes the light waggon was abreast of the children; and the driver as he passed leaned a little forward in his seat and glanced toward Mildred and the two boys.

"Did you see who that was?" and Ray caught hold of Arthur's arm excitedly. "Did you see who that was, Art?"

"Slim George, the gambler!" Arthur declared. "And I am sure he recognised us. I saw him start when he saw us, and glance toward the camp. We don't seem to be able to lose him. Still, I suppose he's got just as

much of a right to go to California as we have if he wants to."

"But it's queer, his keeping right along with us," Ray insisted, glancing uneasily after the spring waggon, which soon passed the slower-moving oxen of The Mourners, and disappeared over the top of a small hill. "Anyway, I hope this is the last we see of him. With that rig he certainly ought to keep ahead of us if he cares to. Now we'd better return to the camp. It is nearly sundown."

On their way back to camp they met Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins, who were about to visit a party of emigrants camped a little farther on down the trail.

"Guess whom we saw pass along the trail a few minutes ago, driving a span of mules hitched to a light spring waggon?" Arthur called as the two men came up.

"The minister and his wife," laughed Tom Rawlins, "going out to make a neighbourly call— No— Well, who then could it have been?"

"That gambler you knocked down on board the boat," declared Arthur.

"The skunk! If I ever catch him at his dirty tricks again," and the big right fist of Tom Rawlins clenched itself involuntarily.

"Did he see you boys? Did he recognise you?" asked Mr. Judson quickly.

"Yes, I am sure he did," replied Arthur, "for he leaned forward in his waggon to get a good look at us, and I saw him start and glance up toward the camp."

Mr. Judson's face clouded, but he said no more about the gambler; and the two men soon passed on their way to the camp, whose white-topped waggons

could be seen crowning a little hill half a mile farther to the west, telling the boys that they would be back in an hour or so.

That night Mildred and her mother slept in the space prepared for their bedroom in the waggon, while Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins and the two boys and Scoot occupied the Judson tent. A second tent, that had been purchased in Independence the Saturday before they started, was turned over to Jud Jimpson and his family. This was the usual sleeping arrangement thereafter.

The night was divided into three watches of two and a half hours each, beginning at nine o'clock, the bedtime hour. Ray and Arthur wished to stand their share of the night-guard, but Mr. Judson bade them keep their willingness in reserve for a few days, until they had become more accustomed to camp life, promising them their fill of guard duty when they reached the Indian country, where it would be necessary to keep a constant watch over their cattle and horses to prevent the red thieves from stealing them.

"I'm awfully tired, and my legs feel as if they would never want to straddle another horse," Ray confessed as he rolled himself up in his blanket inside the tent preparatory to going to sleep that night; "but it's been a bully day. And say, Art, do you know it don't seem possible to me now that I can be the same boy that used to slave for old farmer Thompson. Just think, we might have been hoeing corn these days instead of making this glorious trip to the gold mines of California across the plains."

"You're right. It don't seem possible that we can be the same two boys sleeping here in this tent out on

the prairie who a month ago were sleeping in the parlour-chamber of farmer Thompson's barn," Arthur replied. "I wonder if old Thompson has found out yet what became of us. I wish——"

"Boys," interrupted Mr. Judson, "as soon as we crawl into our blankets that's the signal for all talk to stop and sleep to begin. Besides, I have to go on guard in about a couple of hours, and I want to get to sleep. Good-night."

"Good-night," responded Ray and Arthur; and five minutes later all in the tent were sound asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN BEHIND THE ROCK

JEDIDIAH JUDSON and his companions were too experienced and too wise plainsmen to overload their waggons or overwork their oxen, as the majority of the emigrants did, in their anxiety to be sure to take enough with them and in their eagerness to get to the promised land as speedily as possible. They knew only too well from past unfortunate experiences that for a long journey like this overland you must take only the most necessary things and make haste slowly. Consequently the waggons of our friends carried a much lighter load than did those of most of the emigrants, and they travelled at the beginning of the journey, while the oxen were getting hardened to their work, many miles less a day, taking long rests at noon and stopping for the night early in the day.

Naturally Ray and Arthur became just a little impatient at this seeming slowness, especially when they saw emigrant after emigrant overtake them and pass on ahead, often tauntingly promising to tell the folks in California that they were coming and to try to get them to leave some of the gold until they came. But Mr. Judson only chuckled at these remarks, and bade the jokers to remember that California was a long way off, and

to wait until they got there before they did their bragging.

"Now, don't get anxious," he said to Ray and Arthur, who, boy-like, could not help showing their impatience to get on faster. "This is a time when the more haste at the start means the less speed at the end. A month or two from now we'll be passing these same fellows that are crowing over us now, and they won't catch up with us again neither. Now just look there," and he pointed a little to one side of the trail to where a massive carved oak bureau lay abandoned. "There's a sample of the foolishness of them smart fellows who start out to haul a load of useless house-truck to California, as if it were but a mile or two out in the country 'stead of a couple of thousand miles; and you'll find old tables, bureaus, chairs, and like useless truck scattered 'long the trail all the way from here to the Sacramento. And 'twon't be long now before you'll begin to see the carcasses of worn-out oxen and horses and mules, killed by too fast driving. No, I reckon this is the time when it will pay this company to make haste slowly." And with this explanation Ray and Arthur were forced to be content; but long before they reached California both boys had ample proof of the correctness of Mr. Judson's conclusions in the hundreds of abandoned cattle, household goods, and odds and ends of all kinds that they saw scattered along both sides of the long trail.

For the first few days the trail ran through a country of rolling prairie-lands, crossed here and there by streams of water hastening eastward to join the waters of the Missouri. Sometimes there were high bluffs along the banks of the streams, and frequently they

had considerable difficulty getting their waggons down the steep banks and across the water. But during the first week of the journey of our friends westward, nothing of sufficient importance happened to them to deserve special recording here. Of course, hardly an hour passed without Mildred and Ray and Arthur seeing something interesting or novel to their unaccustomed eyes—innumerable buffalo skulls, roving bands of Indians seen at a distance, skulking coyotes, a few antelope, swiftly fleeing jack-rabbits, acres of beautiful wild flowers, picturesque bits of scenery—but while these were all wonderfully interesting to the children, they had no direct bearing upon the fortunes of our adventurers, and are sufficiently dwelt upon in the naming. It was not until the second week out from Independence that the serious troubles of our party began, and they began with the first day of that week.

On this second Monday, about the middle of the afternoon, while Ray and Arthur and Mildred were off for a little gallop on their ponies a half a mile or so from the trail, they came to a small hill whose southern slope was thickly carpeted with the most beautiful and vari-coloured flowers.

"Oh!" cried Mildred, jumping from the back of her pony, "I must have some of these beautiful flowers to take to mamma and papa and Baby Jimpson! Aren't they lovely?" and the delighted girl began gathering handfuls of the flowers, some of which she was constantly throwing away in order to make room for some newly discovered beauty.

"Looks just as if God had tacked down a beautiful carpet over the hillside, don't it?" exclaimed Arthur

enthusiastically, as he slid from the back of Black Duke and joined Mildred in her flower gathering.

"Well, I fancy it was God that tacked down that carpet," Ray declared. "Man couldn't do it. I want a bunch of them flowers to give to Scoot and Sally," and in a moment more he was off the back of Getthere and picking flowers with both hands.

At last the arms and hands of the three children were full of the beautiful blooms, and they paused to look around for a convenient spot where they might arrange them in better shape to carry back to the waggons, which they could see slowly crawling along over the prairie some three-quarters of a mile distant. They saw on the very summit of the hill a huge black rock half as big as a house.

"Let's sit down in the shade of that rock," Arthur proposed, "and tie the flowers up in bunches. I've got a lot of string in my pocket."

Mildred and Ray agreed, and they started at once for the rock, leading their ponies behind them by their bridle-reins. They approached the rock from the west, and in order to get to the shady side, they were obliged to walk partly around it. Ray was ahead, and just as he turned the almost square corner of the rock, a man jumped quickly up from behind it and walked rapidly away, carefully keeping his back turned toward the two boys.

"Hello!" Ray called, stopping in surprise and staring after the man. "What is your hurry? We won't hurt you."

The man never answered a word nor turned his face in the least toward them, but continued to walk swiftly away.

"Well, he don't act as if he liked the looks of we, us, and company, does he?" Arthur inquired laughing, and then instantly sobering, continued: "That was queer, his hurrying off that way without saying a word. White men don't usually treat folks that way in this part of the world. Who can he be? And what was he doing hiding there behind that rock?"

"There is something familiar in his looks," Ray declared, staring after the man, "in the set of his shoulders—in the way he carries his head— Art," and he turned excitedly to Arthur, "look at him closely! Look at him closely! Who does he make you think of?"

For a minute Arthur gazed inquiringly at the retreating form, then his face suddenly whitened and he started.

"The man who made us dance!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "The man who made us dance! I'd almost swear he is the man who made us dance. If I could only see his face— The coward!" and his cheeks flushed with rage at the remembrance of the pain and humiliation he had suffered at the hands of that man. "What can he be doing here? What was he hiding behind that rock for? He must hate Big Tom Rawlins worse than poison. Could he have been watching for him? I'm going to find out for sure who he is. Come on, Ray! You stay here, Mildred!" and Arthur leaped on the back of Black Duke, and followed by Ray, started on the gallop after the man, intending to ride up and speak to him, so that he would be obliged to show his face. But before the boys had ridden five rods, the man whirled suddenly around, threw his rifle to his shoulder, and fired, the ball cutting a hole through the wide-brimmed felt hat worn by Arthur.

It needed no interpreter to translate the meaning of that shot. The boys understood at once that the man did not wish to be followed, that he did not intend to be followed, and they respected his wishes with a suddenness that brought both of their horses back on their haunches.

"The villain, the cowardly villain!" exclaimed Arthur indignantly, taking off his hat and thrusting a finger through the round hole in its brim. "Six inches farther to the right and a little lower and that bullet would have gone through the top of my head," and his face whitened. "Well, I got a glimpse of his face, anyway, and now I am almost sure of his being the coward who made us dance. But what does it mean? Why is he here? Why was he so afraid that we should see who he was? How dared he shoot at me? The coward! Just wait until I tell Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins!" and the indignant boy whirled his horse around and started off on the gallop for the waggons, calling: "Come on, quick! We'll get Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins after him. They'll soon teach him better manners."

Ray sat for a minute or two staring blankly after the man, indignant and angry, and with half a mind to gallop after the brute, in spite of his rifle, and tell him in his most vigorous English what he thought of him; but fortunately he did not attempt anything as foolhardy as that. Instead, he turned his horse and rode back to where Mildred had mounted and was awaiting him, her face white and her eyes dilating.

"Did that man shoot at you boys?" she cried. "Did he shoot at you?"

"That's what he did," Ray replied. "The coward!"

"Just wait until I tell papa! Come on," and she whirled Beauty around and galloped swiftly after Arthur, forgetful of the flowers she had taken so great a delight in gathering.

Ray, as he turned to follow, glanced in the direction of the fleeing man. He had reached the top of a small ridge of hills, and at the moment Ray looked, he turned, shook his fist in his direction, and vanished down the opposite slope of the hill.

When Ray looked in the direction of the waggons, he was surprised to see that they had been drawn up in a half circle and had stopped, and that the men were hurriedly unyoking the oxen as if to pitch camp. Almost at the same moment he heard a crash of distant thunder, and half turning in his saddle, he saw a bluish-black mass of clouds rising swiftly above the southwestern horizon, backed by solid banks of gray that rolled upward like the folds of an enormous theatre curtain, while the air was filled with the rumbling roar and crash of distant thunder. Across this dark mass zigzagged the lightning in almost continuous flashes.

At first there had been no wind, the air hanging absolutely motionless, but now a light breeze sprang up that soon became a gale. The air grew dark and darker; the roar of the thunder came near and nearer; the flashes of lightning became each moment more vivid and blinding; and now a sound, like the far-off beating of great waves against a rocky shore, reached the ears. It looked as if the Storm God had concentrated all his forces of wind and rain and lightning only to hurl them tumultuously across the wide expanses of these great plains.

All the wild creatures of the air and the land were

affrighted and hurrying to shelter. Birds of various sizes went crying through the air, flying before the storm, now almost out of sight, again beating the tops of the prairie-grass with their wings; rabbits leaped through the grass as if the hounds of death were after them; coyotes flashed swiftly by, side by side, it might be, with an antelope; and the lesser animals of the ground skurried swiftly to the shelter of hole or rock or tree.

Ray noticed all these signs and tokens of the coming fury of the storm indefinitely as he dug his spurs into the sides of Getthere and rode at full speed for the waggons. He had heard much of the terrible violence and suddenness of these plain-storms, and knew how greatly they were dreaded by the emigrants, and this knowledge, added to the terrifying sights and sounds already described, made him exceedingly anxious to reach the shelter of the waggons as speedily as possible.

"Quick! Off with them saddles and bridles and tie your horses to the waggon-wheels!" Mr. Judson shouted as the three children galloped up, at the same time rushing up to Mildred's pony. "Get into the waggon with your mother, Dimples," he said as he lifted her from the saddle. "Looks as if we were going to have a big blow and rain, but 'tain't nothing to be scart about," and with swift hands he began unsaddling and unbridling the pony, while Mildred ran to where Mrs. Judson was calling to her from the white depths of their big waggon.

By now the oxen had all been closely hobbled and turned loose near the waggons, and in a few minutes more the three ponies were safely tied to the

waggon-wheels; and Mr. Judson and the two boys hurried to where Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins were working like a dozen men to get the tents up before the fury of the storm burst down on them.

"That bag of tent-pins, quick!" Tom Rawlins shouted as he and Jud Jimpson held up one of the tents by its poles. The other tent was already safely up. "It's going to be a regular tornado, and the rain'll be dumped down in bucketfuls, and we want to keep a covering over our heads."

Ray held the pins while Mr. Judson drove them into the ground, and Arthur tied the tent-ropes to the pins as fast as they were driven into the earth.

"Look out! Here she comes! Hold tight!" suddenly shouted Mr. Judson, dropping the sledge-hammer with which he had been driving the pins and catching hold of an unfastened tent-rope, while Ray and Arthur and even Scoot jumped to other unfastened ropes and gripped hold of them as if their lives depended on their keeping their grasp on those ropes.

There had been a lull in the violence of the wind for the past few minutes until hardly a breath of air moved. The lightnings had ceased to flash, and only the low, deep, far-off roar of the advancing deluge of rain broke the silence of the great plain. The clouds had grown denser and darker, and had settled until they seemed to rest on the surrounding hill-tops. It was as if the mighty forces of Nature had paused to draw in long breaths, and to gather themselves for the furious onset soon to follow. But at the moment of Mr. Judson's shout, a blinding flash of lightning leaped earthward from the very centre of the whirling storm-clouds, swiftly followed by other flashes, until

the atmosphere was ablaze with vivid lights, while the thunder pealed and crashed and rumbled and roared in a most awful manner. A minute later and a violent puff of wind, as if blown from a monster bellows, struck the camp with a suddenness and force that sent every movable thing flying; and was followed by such a tremendous downpour of rain that it seemed as if the bottom must have dropped from under some aerial lake and allowed the water to fall in great sheets on the plains below.

Unfortunately but half of the tent-pins had been driven into the ground and the tent-ropes fastened to them when the storm struck the camp in all its violence of wind and rain; and at the first mighty blast the tent went up into the air like a balloon, tearing itself free from the holds of Mr. Judson and the two boys, while one of the flying ropes twisted itself around an ankle of Scoot and yanked the yelling negro boy aloft with it.

"Catch it! Stop it! Grab him!" yelled Tom Rawlins; and the three men and two boys raced wildly after the soaring tent and dangling boy.

The tent went flapping madly through the air some dozen feet above the ground, with Scoot hanging head downward from one of the ropes and frantically pawing the air, directly over the spot where the hobbled oxen had bunched together for protection from the storm. Scoot's head was not six inches above the backs of the cattle; and the terrified boy, ready to grab anything that promised to anchor him to the earth, seized hold of the long tail of one of the steers, and holding on for dear life, brought the now wet and heavy canvas down flopping on the heads of the frightened oxen.

In an instant there was the most dire confusion of fluttering tent-cloth and bellowing steers and yelling negro boy, as the frantic oxen endeavoured to escape from the clinging folds of the wet canvas.

A moment later and out of this noisy jumble of horns and hoofs and flopping tent-cloth Scoot bounded and rolled, not unlike a black rubber ball, and, jumping to his feet, fled, yelling and clawing the air with both hands, to shelter under Mr. Judson's big waggon, where, clinging to one of the wheels, he hugged the ground as closely as possible, shuddering and moaning at every lightning flash and thunder peal.

For a few minutes it looked as if the frantically struggling oxen were sure to seriously hurt themselves as they plunged and tumbled and rolled over one another; but the strong rope hobbles held, and after an exceedingly exciting and wet ten minutes the tent-cloth was secured and the cattle quieted down, with no worse damage done than the loss of various small patches of hair and hide.

"Well, I reckon there's no use of trying to put that tent up now," and Mr. Judson glanced ruefully at the tangled and torn pile of dirty canvas that had been dragged back to its place near the waggons. "Great Scott, there goes the other tent! Quick, get a hold of them ropes and hold her down!" and he made a mad dive through the rain for the ropes of the tent still standing; but his warning came too late, for even as the hands of the men seized the ropes, the tent-pins flew out of the ground, and the wet tent collapsed on top of the yelling, screaming, crying Jimpson family, who had sought shelter beneath it.

Again the confusion was dire; but after another ten

minutes of equally exciting and even wetter work than before, the Jimpson family were rescued, wet as drowned rats, and stowed away in the shelter of Tom Rawlins's red waggon, which was more roomy than their own.

"No use tryin' tew get a tent up in this danged wind," declared Jud Jimpson, bracing himself against the blasts of the hurricane. "It's 'nough tew blow th' bugs out of a dog's ha'r. Th' waggon for me 'til she stops blowin'," and he humped up his back and made a dash for his waggon.

"Reckon you're right. Come on, boys," and Mr. Judson, followed most willingly by Ray and Arthur and Tom Rawlins, started for his waggon. When he reached the waggon, he paused long enough to grab Scoot, who still clung to the waggon-wheel under the waggon, by his shirt-collar and the seat of his trousers, and shove him in the waggon in front of him.

"Whew!" and Ray stood in the middle of the waggon-box, while the water ran in streams from his hair and clothes. "I never saw a rain-storm like this before! Just listen to it. Sounds as if somebody was dumping barrels of water on top of the waggon-cover. And the wind! Jee-my'-mee! I thought sure it would blow me clean out of my boots!"

"An' I done spec'late I's gwine straight to glory 'long wid dat tent," and Scoot stood up and shook himself as if anxious to be assured that every part of him was where it belonged and securely fastened. "Mighty lucky t'ing fo' dis niggah dat steers am got long tails; mighty lucky t'ing I done cotch dat long tail. Golly! I done 'speck somethin' busted up yondah," and he pointed skyward. "I——"

"Oh, Mr. Judson," broke in Arthur excitedly, "a man shot at Ray and me, and the ball went through the brim of my hat! See," and he took off his dripping hat and showed the bullet hole; and then he told the astonished Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins of the strange and hostile behaviour of the man behind the rock, and of how he and Ray thought they had recognised in him the man who had made them dance.

Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins were both very angry; but the violence of the storm made it impossible for them to do anything that night to avenge the affront to the boys, and by morning, who could tell where the man would be? However, they vowed if they ever "set eyes on the coward" again, they would teach him a lesson he would never forget; and there they were compelled to rest the matter for the present.

A little before dark the wind quieted, but the rain continued to pour steadily down all night long. There was no warm supper that night, not even so much as a cup of hot coffee, for they had been forced to camp where there was no wood; and even if they had had the wood, it is doubtful if they could have made a fire burn in that deluge of water. The undamaged tent was set up again as soon as the wind permitted, and made as comfortable as possible for the men folks; but the ground was soggy with water, and a fine mist beat through the canvas of the tent and fell on everything within, and when one laid down a little pool of water would soon form under the body, so that "as comfortable as possible" did not appear to mean much under those circumstances.

"Well, I reckon this is where the picnic don't come in, ay boys?" Mr. Judson said as he stood up to wring

the water out of his blanket. "I'm beginning to feel like a soaked sponge, as if you could squeeze water out of me anywhere."

"Wish I had a boat," Ray complained. "I'm afraid to go to sleep for fear I will roll over and get my mouth under water and drown."

"I am sure there's a young ocean started under me," Arthur declared; "and if I ever get to sleep, I expect to dream of being a fish swimming under the ice up somewhere near the North Pole. Wish they'd heat their water before they dump it down on a fellow."

"Hu! this ain't nothin'," grunted Jud Jimpson from the depths of his blanket and pool. "You boys don't know solid comfort when you see it. Jest lay still, an' by-an'-by th' water all around you'll get warm an' comfortable, an' then you'll dream of sleepin' in your ma's feather-bed 'stead of swimmin' around in water under th' ice. Now I'm goin' tew sleep," and he settled down comfortably in his pool of rain-water, and was soon snoring as loudly as if he were indeed sleeping in "mother's feather-bed."

Ray and Arthur tried to follow suit; and did finally succeed in getting to sleep, but there was no "mother's feather-bed" effects in their dreams.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IN THE QUICKSANDS

THE morning dawned bright and clear, but the ground was soggy and the wheeling hard, and our friends made but little progress that day. They found every creek and stream swollen by the rain and full of mud, and the banks soft and miry and almost impassable.

"I can smell trouble down there," and Jud Jimpson halted his oxen on the muddy bank of one of these swollen streams and looked suspiciously at the thick water rolling sluggishly between him and the opposite shore. "I reckon one of you boys had better try that water first hossback," and he turned to Ray and Arthur, who had ridden up on their ponies.

"All right," promptly answered Ray. "We'll both give her a try. Come on, Art. We've got to cross anyway, and it might as well be first as last. Get up, Getthere," and he started down the bank with Arthur riding along by his side.

Both horses were accustomed to crossing streams—they had waded through many during the past week—and they entered the water readily. The stream was about a dozen yards wide, and so thick with mud that it was impossible to see its bottom. The water was not deep, hardly up to the horses' bellies.

"It's all right! Come on!" Ray shouted back to Mr. Jimpson, half turning in his saddle; and then he felt a quiver run through Getthere's body, and the pony began to struggle violently, as if some vast unseen monster had hold of his feet and was trying to pull him under the water.

At the same moment Arthur's pony commenced to flounder and struggle as his feet began to sink in the treacherous river bottom.

"Quicksands! It's quicksands!" and Arthur turned a suddenly whitened face to Ray. "Get up, Black Duke! Get up!" and he began digging his spurs into his pony flanks and striking him with the small whip he carried. "That's a good boy, get up! Don't give up! Splendid! Splendid! Get up! Get up!! Get up!!!—Oh, he's stuck!—He's sinking!—Oh, what shall we do?—Help! Help! We're in the quicksands!" and he turned in his saddle and stretched out his arms appealingly toward the shore. "Save Black Duke! Don't let him go down! Save him!" He had no thought of his own peril.

In the meantime Ray and his horse were in equal danger, with the pony's feet stuck fast in the quicksands and his body slowly, slowly sinking down, down into the clinging, grasping, pulling sands.

Desperately the two horses struggled to release their feet from the clutch of the death-sands. Great patches of white foam fell from their jowls and floated away on the black water. Their bodies steamed with sweat and quivered with distress and terror. They turned their heads, and their wild eyes looked appealingly toward their young masters. But every effort they made appeared only to sink them deeper, to give the fiend

below renewed strength of hold, to hasten the inevitable terrible end.

"Get off their backs! Get off their backs!" shouted Jud Jimpson, rushing to his waggon for the long rope which every wise emigrant carried with him for just such emergencies as this. "Can't you see that your weight is helping to sink them? Get off their backs an' float in th' water beside them. Don't put a foot on th' bottom!"

Ray and Arthur instantly slipped off the backs of the ponies into the muddy stream and attempted to keep afloat by swimming; but the water was only about three feet deep, and it is not easy to swim in that depth of water.

"Rest one hand on the saddle and let the body float out on the water!" shouted Mr. Judson, rushing down the bank. "Keep cool, and don't put a foot on the bottom, and we'll have you all safely out in a jiffy."

"Catch hold of the rope!" and Jud Jimpson ran down to the bank, a long rope coiled around his left arm, and with a vigorous swing of his right arm, cast one end of the rope to Arthur. "Tie it tew th' pommel of your saddle an' tie it stout; an' then take hold of th' rope an' pull yourself tew shore, an' keep your feet off th' bottom," he warned.

"Here you be!" called Tom Rawlins cheerily, swinging the rope he had brought with him from his waggon around his head and throwing it to Ray. "Take a diamond-hitch with it around the horn of your saddle and pull yourself to shore, and we'll fasten a yoke of oxen to the rope and yank your horse out in no time. Now just keep cool. There's no danger, only

the muddy water, and that'll wash off," and he laughed loudly.

Arthur quickly seized the rope thrown to him, and in two minutes had it firmly tied to the pommel of his stout, double-cinched, Western saddle, made to withstand almost any strain, carefully keeping his feet from touching the treacherous bottom as he did so. This done, he turned to Black Duke.

"Don't think I'm deserting you, old boy," he said. "Don't think I'm deserting you, because I am not. Just keep up your courage a few minutes longer and we'll have you out of here in spite of all the quicksands west of the Big Muddy," and seizing hold of the rope which Jud Jimpson held taut, he began pulling himself hand over hand through the water toward the shore.

In the meantime Ray had tied his rope to the horn of his saddle; but forgetful of his own peril in his anxiety to save his horse, he had allowed his feet to rest on the bottom during the few moments he stood by the side of the pony tying the rope to the saddle; and so swiftly and insidiously did the sand seize hold of its prey that when he turned to grasp the rope to pull himself ashore, he found both feet immovable, and knew by the pressure around his legs that the death-sand was already above his knees, that he was still sinking.

It would be impossible to describe the cold chill of horror that went through Ray's young body when he discovered his peril. For the moment he forgot the nearness of help, forgot everything but the death-grip of the sand; and with a cry of consternation, he caught hold of the rope and desperately struggled to tear himself from that fatal hold that was slowly drawing him

down, down to a most horrible death. But his utmost efforts could not loosen the grip of the sand by the smallest fraction of an inch, could not even stay the steady resistless downpull.

"Keep quiet! Keep quiet!" It was Big Tom Rawlins's cheery voice that recalled him to his senses. "Quit your thrashing around like a locoed steer! 'Twill only muddy the water and make you sink all the faster. We'll have another rope here in a minute and snake you out so quick that it'll take your breath away, if you don't hold on to it good and hard, so don't get scarey."

"All right," Ray called back, his panic all over. "Me and Getthere will wait right here; and we'll promise not to do any more mad prancing about with our feet, won't we, Getthere?" and he stroked his pony's neck affectionately.

"Here, catch this rope and tie it around your body under your arms," called Mr. Judson as he flung Ray one end of the rope he had raced back to his waggon to procure.

Ray deftly caught the rope and quickly secured it around his waist.

Tom Rawlins and Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson and even Mildred and her mother and Scoot seized hold of the other end of the rope.

"Ready?" called Tom Rawlins.

"Yes," answered Ray.

"Heave, ho! Heave, ho! All together!" yelled the giant, putting forth all of his great strength, heartily seconded by each of the others.

The rope tightened with a jerk under Ray's shoulders; and for one fearful moment he feared that the

terrible strain would pull his body from his legs, so tenaciously did the sand cling to them; and then all of a sudden the sand seemed to let go, and he shot up as if propelled from a catapult, and landed head first into the water and mud a dozen feet away from where he had been standing, and was quickly hauled, spluttering and blowing mud and water from his mouth, to the shore.

The moment Ray was safely ashore the three men dropped the rope, and hurriedly fastened a yoke of the strongest oxen to each of the ropes tied to the pommels of the saddles on the two ponies. Time was most precious. The horses were sinking fast, and every moment made the task of getting them out more difficult.

"Well, I hope Getthere don't land on his head in the mud the way I did," Ray remarked, wiping the mud and water from his face and hair with a towel Mildred had brought him, as he watched the hitching of the oxen to the ropes. "It's a mighty nasty landing place for a respectable horse like Getthere," and he dug something less than a shovelful of dirt out of one of his ears with his finger and flung it disgustedly on the ground. "I feel as if I had swallowed an island."

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Arthur, who was aiding Mildred scrape the mud off Ray's clothes. "There go the oxen! Now—" and he paused breathless, his eyes fixed on Black Duke.

"Oh! Oh!" and Mildred clapped her hands together joyously. "They're both out! They're both out! My, but didn't they make the water fly when they landed on their backs!"

Ray and Arthur ran to the two horses the moment they stood, trembling and shaking themselves, on dry

land, and regardless of the mud and water with which they were covered, threw their arms, each around the neck of his own horse, and told them in boyish words of endearment how glad they were that they had escaped from their terrible peril.

"Hello!" yelled a man from the opposite bank, who had seen their trouble from where he was encamped a quarter of a mile farther up the stream and had hurried to their assistance. "You can't cross there. The storm yesterday spoiled that crossing. The new ford's 'bout a hundred rods up the stream. Drive along on top of the bank, and I'll show you where the crossing is safe. Narrow escape them boys had. Two oxen and a horse went down in them sands not more'n three hours ago. Drive right along on top of the bank and I'll yell when you get to the right place."

The ford pointed out by the obliging stranger proved to be safe and easy, and half an hour later our friends were safely across on the other side of the treacherous stream, a little wiser and wetter, especially Ray and Arthur, but none the worse for their exciting experience.

"I reckon we'd better camp right here," declared Mr. Judson as the waggons halted on the top of the bank. "There's plenty of water, if 'tis muddy, and grass and wood along the stream, and there's no telling when we'd come to another place where we'd have plenty of wood 'long with the grass and water."

For the past few days they had been travelling through an almost treeless region, and had been obliged to use buffalo chips for fuel at more than one camping place, and the thought of camping where there would be plenty of good, clean wood to burn was pleasant to

all. Accordingly the oxen were quickly unyoked and hobbled and turned loose to feed on the grass, the three waggons drawn up in the customary half circle, and the two tents pitched, while Ray and Arthur and Scoot were sent to the "woods" to gather firewood for the stove and the camp-fire.

Along the banks of the stream for a mile or more in either direction were encamped a number of parties of emigrants. Some of these emigrants had been there for several days, delayed by sickness or worn-out stock or broken waggons or other causes; and these all heartily welcomed a newcomer, and quickly gathered around his camp-fire to learn the latest news from the "States" and the back trail, and to swap experiences and tell yarns; and that night the circle around the camp-fire of our friends was a large one.

Ever since reaching Independence, Ray and Arthur had heard terrible tales of the ravages cholera was making among the emigrants, and they had seen a number of the graves of its victims along the side of the trail; but here for the first time they came into the actual presence of the dread disease. A man and a boy had died with it in a camp a few rods farther up the stream only that day, and a woman and her child and two men were down with it in near-by camps; and the gloom and horror of these sudden deaths were in the air, and weighed down the spirits of the men.

"It's a terrible disease," said one of the men around the camp-fire. "A fellow will be well one morning and maybe the next he'll be dead—and such a death!" and the man shuddered. "That's the way my partner, Tom Evans, went, as good a man as ever held a plough—bright and chipper in the morning, mortal sick by

night, and the next morning in his coffin. That was enough for me. Gold is all right, but life is a mortal sight better. I'm going to start back for the States just as soon as my cattle get fit to travel. I reckon Ohio and the old farm is good enough for me."

"I sure didn't know what I was buckin' up against when I started out to navigate one of these here prairie-schooners across this God-forsaken country," grumbled another man, a tall, lank, New Jersey farmer. "Waggon got stuck in one of them blamed rivers th' first day, an' had to get down to my neck in th' mud to help get her out. Then th' next day th' tarnal oxen stampeded an' tipped over th' old schooner an' spilled all th' truck out on th' prairie, an' afore we could get th' blamed cattle corralled th' Lord dumped a thunderstorm down on top of us in barrelfuls an' soaked everything, an' we had to sleep in th' mud that night, with th' tarnal mosquitoes so thick you could cut them out of th' air in chunks with a knife. An' that's 'bout th' way things have been goin' with us ever since; an' them that knows says that what we've had is 'bout like a bed of roses to what is to come afore we reach Californy. I reckon I wasn't built for that sort of thing, an' it's back to New Jersey for me, jest as fast as th' Lord'll let me go," he ended in disgust.

Nearly all spoke in a like vein. The sickness, the unexpected disasters and discouragements and hardships, the continual reports of worse to come, intermingled with rumours of the terrible massacres of whole trains of emigrants by the Indians beyond Fort Laramie, had had such a chilling effect on the heat of their gold fevers that nearly all were ready to turn back in disgust, and return to the more quiet, more comfortable,

and safer lives of the shop or farm, which they had left with such golden hopes but a few short weeks before. What else could be expected from men, who, without previous knowledge or fitting preparation, had rashly undertaken a journey that would try the courage and endurance of men inured to all its hardships and perils and backed by years of experience in the wilds of what was then known as the Great American Desert?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PAWNEE HORSE-THIEF

IN the morning there were two funerals. One of the sick men and the woman had died during the night, and two more men were down with the dread disease, one of them being the tall, lank, New Jersey farmer, who had spoken so discouragingly the night before and had been so anxious to get back to his old home. Alas, poor man! he was doomed to leave his bones, along with many others, by the side of that lonely California trail.

Our friends remained to attend the funerals. Two graves were dug a little to one side of the trail, on the brow of a small hill, the bodies placed in rudely fashioned coffins, a short service held; and then the two coffins were lowered into their graves, the graves filled up even with the ground, and heavy split logs laid longitudinally across the tops and weighed down with large stones, to keep the wolves from digging up the bodies. And thus they were left in that wild waste, without even a name to preserve their remembrance. Alas, how differently hope had pictured their fate!

"That was the lonesomest funeral I ever saw," Mildred said, wiping the tears from her eyes as she walked by the side of her mother back to camp. "I hope that no one that I love will ever have to be buried that way.

It makes me almost sick to think of the poor woman lying there all alone in this wild wilderness," and the tender-hearted girl shuddered as her eyes roamed over the vast expanse of almost barren plains that surrounded the two desolate graves.

"But, my dear child," replied Mrs. Judson, "you must not think of the woman as lying in that lonely grave. The body which you saw buried was only the house in which she had lived and from which she had moved, let us hope, into a far more beautiful home. Death is but the soul's moving-time, when it leaves its worn-out dwelling-place to live in a better house. But we must hurry. See, your father has the oxen already yoked to the waggon," and she pointed to their little camp, anxious to turn Mildred's mind from the sad scene she had just witnessed, where everything was in readiness to continue their journey.

Mrs. Judson had remained a short time after the funeral to give the comfort of her woman's presence to the wife of the dead man, whose grief and despair were pitiful; and in the meantime the men had yoked up the oxen and made ready to depart, eager to get away from this scene of despondency and discouragement.

"I swun th' gloom that hangs over that camp 'most tew thick tew knock a hole in it, even with a forty-ton pile-driver," Jud Jimpson grumbled to Ray and Arthur and Mildred, who were riding near him, as he strode along by the side of his oxen. "I wonder if they expected tew find hotels, with feather-beds an' porterhouse steaks an' waitin'-maids an' all such truck, strung all 'long th' trail awaitin' tew welcome them each night! Th' tarnal idjits, they'd a-better stayed tew

home measurin' calico or hoeing 'taters, 'stead of comin' out here an' blamin' th' country for what they don't know. 'Tain't th' country; 'tis their own danged ignerance. If they hadn't overloaded and overdriven their oxen they wouldn't be all footsore an' worn out now. If they'd knowed how tew take care of themselves an' had brought th' proper kind of grub 'long with them, there'd been no trouble with th' cholera. This ain't no picnic excursion, as I've been a-tellin' you kids, an' them idjits are findin' it out, an' now they want tew go home tew ma, an' they'd better go home tew ma, an' stay home with ma," he ended, his disgust too great for further words.

For the next few days our friends travelled up the valley of the Little Blue, a swift, crooked stream flowing between ridges seldom more than a mile or two apart, with banks fringed here and there with growths of cottonwoods and willows. The grass here was abundant, the weather delightful, the trail for the most part easy wheeling, and under these benign influences, the gloom of their recent experiences with death and discouragements soon vanished, and the children became their own happy selves again.

They were now passing through the country of the Pawnees, the boldest and most cunning thieves of all the Western tribes of Indians, and reports were continually coming in of trouble between them and the emigrants. Horses and cattle were stolen, sometimes literally from under the very noses of the unsophisticated emigrants, and there were ugly rumours afloat of lonely emigrants waylaid and massacred and all their goods and cattle stolen and their waggons burned.

And now it was that Ray and Arthur learned the

truth of Mr. Judson's words when he told them that they would have their fill of guard duty when they reached the Indian country. They were obliged to stand guard a part of every night; for even when the horses were picketed and the oxen hobbled within a few feet of the tents and the camp-fire, it was necessary to keep a constant guard over them for fear the red thieves would creep up, under shelter of the darkness, loosen a number of horses, and quietly slip away with them. Then, too, they had to be continually on their guard against a stampede. A number of Indians would steal quietly up to within a short distance of a sleeping camp of emigrants, and then suddenly yelling and waving their blankets and firing off their guns, would ride pell-mell down upon the camp, driving off with them as many of the terrified cattle and horses as succeeded in breaking away from their fastenings, throwing the whole camp into the greatest terror and confusion, and usually getting away with their booty before the astounded emigrants could fire a gun at them. This was called a stampede; and was frequently so successful that many an unfortunate emigrant lost all his live-stock at one fell swoop, and was left stranded on the plains until rescued by his fellow-travellers.

Ray and Arthur soon found that standing guard during the darkness and silence of the night hours, not knowing at what moment an Indian arrow might come hurtling out of the surrounding darkness to bury itself in your body, or a band of yelling, shooting savages burst like a thunderbolt upon the camp, was an exceedingly ticklish and lonesome duty to perform; but both lads were brave and plucky fellows, and neither so much as hinted that he would like to be excused from

doing his share of the guard duty. Indeed, both boys would have been very angry had any one proposed such a thing to them. They would have considered it a reflection upon their courage, and resented it promptly and vigorously.

"Now, Ray, just keep your eyes peeled and your ears open," Mr. Judson said as Ray was making himself ready to go on guard the fourth night out from the cholera camp. "And don't stand where the light from the camp-fire can fall on you. Keep your body in the dark and your eyes on the waggons and horses, and don't let anything come nigh them. Shoot at anything that looks the least suspicious. Better to lose a rifle ball than the horses. Them Boston fellows ahead of us had two of their best horses stolen from under their very noses last night by them pesky Pawnee thieves, and it was about here that a party of emigrants were attacked a few days ago by Indians and two men killed and a number wounded. So don't take any chances. Shoot at anything suspicious, even if you do rout out the camp. Tom Rawlins has the guard with you, and he's standing over yonder by the oxen," and Mr. Judson pointed to where a number of dark shadows showed where the oxen were lying down. "You're to keep your eyes on the horses and the waggons, and had better stand there, back of Jud's waggon, where you can see all the waggons and horses and be in the dark yourself. Don't move 'round much, or if there are any savages spying 'round, they'll spot you. Now, keep cool, and your eyes and ears open," and Mr. Judson stepped into the tent, leaving Ray to his lonely and dangerous vigils.

The night was moonless and hazy, and just dark enough to make an object a couple of rods away look

shadowy and unreal; and Ray could not but help thinking, as he took his station back of the waggon and glanced around, how easy it would be for an Indian to creep silently up within bowshot, and he shuddered at the thought, send his swift and silent arrow straight through his body. But as the slow minutes passed, until an hour or more had gone by, and he had seen nothing more dangerous than a coyote or two skulking hungrily near the waggons, and had heard nothing more suspicious than the yelpings and howlings of that same ever-present animal, he began to feel more secure, and even to relax just a little his watchfulness, while, in spite of his utmost efforts, his eyelids began to grow heavy, and presently his vision became so blurred and indistinct with sleep that he failed to see, or at least to notice, how suspiciously one of the coyotes was beginning to act.

This animal had been skulking in the grass not far from Ray for some little time, gradually working nearer and nearer all the time to the waggons, to whose wheels the three horses were tied within the half circle formed by the waggons, and frequently pausing to glance with more than wolfish intentness in the direction of Ray. When Ray's head began to nod a little now and then, and his body to lean more heavily on the butt of his rifle, the coyote became even bolder, and stole up close to the middle waggon, where it stopped for a moment to glance sharply at Ray, and then glided softly under the waggon and vanished from sight. A few minutes later Getthere appeared to have broken loose from his fastenings, for he began slowly working his way toward the open space between the two outer waggons, keeping to the farther side of where

Ray stood and moving so cautiously that his feet made no sound on the soft prairie sod.

Ray continued to nod and to lean more heavily on his rifle, but suddenly he overbalanced himself and nearly fell, and awoke with a start just as Getthere passed beyond the outer waggon. Ray rubbed his eyes vigorously, glanced around, and saw dimly in the darkness a shadowy horse moving away from the camp. For a moment he could not believe his eyes; and then, concluding that one of the horses must have broken loose, he started toward the animal, softly calling, "Whoa! Whoa!" and got the scare of his life, when an arrow whistled through his coat-sleeve and an Indian with a loud whoop leaped on the back of the horse and dashed off at full speed.

"Whoa! Help! Stop him! Murder! Indians!" yelled Ray, blindly throwing his rifle to his shoulder and firing in the direction of the fleeing Indian.

The Indian, doubtless hoping to stampede the oxen and thus secure one or more of them, rode straight toward the cattle, whooping at the top of his voice and waving his blanket; but he had failed to take Big Tom Rawlins into his calculations, who at the first outcry had whirled around, his rifle to his shoulder; and now as the Indian came tearing down upon him, he aimed as best he could in the darkness and fired, and dropping his rifle, sprang at the horse's head. Fortunately his right hand caught hold of the halter, and held on with a grip that brought the pony back on his haunches and sent the Indian flying over his head. The red-skin landed on his feet like a cat, and with a final whoop swiftly vanished in the darkness.

Instantly the whole camp was in the wildest turmoil.

The oxen bellowed with fright and struggled madly to free themselves from their hobbles; the two remaining ponies jerked and pulled at their fastenings frantically; Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson leaped out of their blankets and rushed, rifles in hands, from the tent, followed by Arthur and Scoot, whose teeth were clattering against one another like Spanish castanets; the Jimpson family screamed and cowered in their tent; and Mildred and her mother thrust their white faces out through the waggon-opening, nearly frightened out of their wits by the dreadful clamour of yells and shots and bellowings and screams.

Half an hour later, when all had quieted down and Ray, with flushed cheeks, had told the story of how his own neglect of duty had given the Indian his opportunity, Jud Jimpson crawled under the middle waggon, the one to which Getthere had been tied, and presently crawled back again, dragging behind him the skin, head and all, of a coyote.

"There's all that's left of your Indian," he said, throwing the skin down at the feet of Ray. "An' many an older eye than yourn has been fooled afore now by that same devil's contraption, so jest—Hello! what's that dangling from th' back of your coat?" and Jud Jimpson stepped quickly up to Ray, who now stood where the light of the camp-fire shone full on him, and jerked out the arrow, that after passing through the sleeve had pierced the side of Ray's coat and now hung dangling from his back, caught in the cloth by the feathers on its haft. "Well, now, that's what I calls perlite, tew stop tew leave you his card, an' he bein' in a hurry, tew," and he handed the arrow to Ray, at the same time catching hold of his coat and examining the

holes made by the arrow. "Not a skin scratch!" and he slapped Ray on the back. "You're a lucky dog! Them red devils' arrows don't always jest make holes in a feller's coat, as my own hide might testify, bein' it had a tongue."

"I'll just keep this," Ray said as he took the long, steel-pointed arrow that had come so near passing through his body as well as his coat, "to remind me of what I am apt to get if I do not keep my eyes open when I am doing guard duty," and he thrust the arrow into his belt. "Now, I'll go back and finish my guard, and I'll keep my eyes open, too. Why, if it had not been for Tom Rawlins I'd have lost Getthere!" and his eyes turned affectionately to his pony, now again safely tied to the waggon-wheel. "And all on account of my own carelessness!"

"And, mayhap, something far dearer than horse-flesh, my boy," and Mr. Judson's eyes turned to the waggon where Mildred and her mother had again retired. "Don't forget them, Ray; and it will do more to keep your eyes open than that Indian arrow sticking in your belt."

"I won't forget again," and Ray hung his head. "I won't forget again. I've had my lesson," and shouldering his rifle, he resolutely returned to his post, while the others went back to their blankets and slept in peace during the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DEVIL'S QUARTET

ON the afternoon of the next day our friends passed from the valley of the Little Blue, over the ridge dividing its waters from those of the Platte River, and encamped at night on the shores of that famous stream, some fifteen miles below Fort Kearney, a military post established only the year before by the United States Government to protect the fast-increasing overland travel to the rich lands and gold-fields of the Pacific slope. An early start the next morning enabled them to reach Fort Kearney a little after noon, where they were to remain in camp two or three days in order to rest their oxen, do some needed repairing, and procure a few necessary supplies.

The camp was pitched a mile below the fort, on the opposite bank of the river, for the sake of grass and good water, which could not be procured nearer the post on account of the devastations of the great army of emigrants that had preceded them, and a part of whom still remained in camp near the fort.

That afternoon Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson mounted Ray's and Arthur's horses and rode across the river, which is here easily forded by man or beast, to the fort. Indeed, the Platte River, like a great many people, is not nearly as great as it appears, being a very

wide but a very shallow stream of water. Washington Irving calls it "the most magnificent and the most useless of streams," while the celebrated humourist, Artemus Ward, expressed his opinion of the river quite as effectively when he declared that "the Platte would be a good river if set on edge," and Bill Nye more recently subscribed to the same views by describing the Platte as a river "having a wide circulation, but little influence."

Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson returned to the camp a little before sundown.

"Who do you think is the commanding officer at the fort?" Mr. Judson asked, as he dismounted, turning to Mildred and Ray and Arthur, who had hurried up, eager to hear about the fort. "Somebody that you all know quite well, although none of you have ever seen him."

"Oh, we can't guess! Tell us," Mildred demanded impatiently.

"Captain Bonneville, now Colonel Bonneville," announced Mr. Judson.

"What! Not *the* Captain Bonneville that we've all been reading about, the one Washington Irving wrote about in that book of Mildred's?" and Arthur's face flushed and his eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"That very identical Captain Bonneville," declared Mr. Judson, smiling, "as you can see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears to-morrow, when you visit the fort with me."

This was wonderful news to Ray and Arthur and Mildred, who had been deeply interested in the adventures of the doughty captain, so entertainingly described by the graceful pen of Irving, because many of

these adventures occurred in the very country through which they were to travel; and now to be able actually to see and to talk with the very man himself was, indeed, a surprising happening, and as pleasant a happening as it was surprising.

Accordingly, about ten o'clock the next morning, Mr. Judson and the three children forded the river, Mr. Judson riding behind Ray on Getthere while crossing, and rode to the fort.

Ray and Arthur were very much disappointed in the appearance of this Western military post. A fort to their minds meant solid walls of stone masonry, bristling with great guns; but here, both the solid stone walls and the great guns were wanting. There were a number of long, low buildings, built of adobe or sun-dried bricks, with flat, unsightly roofs; a large hospital tent; three or four storehouses and workshops, with canvas walls; a couple of long adobe stables, covered with roofs made of brush; tents for the officers and men; and that was all.

"Well, that don't look much like a fort," Ray said disappointedly as the little party rode up to these buildings. "'Twouldn't take much of a cannon to knock it all to smithereens."

"Correct," replied Mr. Judson, smiling. "But seeing that Indians don't indulge none much in cannons, there's little danger of its getting knocked to smithereens or anywhere else by cannons."

At the entrance to the fort they were met by a middle-sized, compactly built man, whose frank, open countenance, well browned by the sun, was enlivened by a pair of pleasant black eyes set below a high forehead. When he lifted his hat to Mildred, he uncovered

a bald crown that shone whitely in contrast to the bronzed skin of his face and neck.

"These three children," Mr. Judson said after he had introduced Mildred and the two boys to Colonel Bonneville, "have all read the story of your adventures as related by Washington Irving, and are overjoyed to be able to meet the hero of them."

"I fear that the story owes most of its fascination to the skill of my friend Irving," Colonel Bonneville replied modestly. "And yet, it was a wonderful journey! a wonderful journey!" and his dark eyes lighted up with the glow of his brave, adventurous soul. "And this journey of yours to the gold mines of California will be a wonderful journey. Do you know," and he turned to Mr. Judson, "every time a train of emigrants passes through here, bound for the gold mines, I am tempted to throw up my commission and join them? And I would if I did not feel it my duty to serve here, where an armed force is sadly needed for the protection of these gold-mad men, women, and children, who are hurrying to California from every quarter of the globe, the majority of them utterly ignorant of the country and its perils. My boys," and he turned to Ray and Arthur with a smile, "I envy you your trip, especially since you are to make it with such agreeable company" —and he bowed gallantly to Mildred—"as I am sure this young lady's and her mother's will prove to be."

Mildred flushed with pleasure, and thanked Colonel Bonneville very prettily for his courtesy, and told him how greatly the story of his adventures had interested her and the boys, and how delighted she was to be able to see him and to talk to him, and how she wished it were possible for him to go with them to California;

while Ray and Arthur stood by, and stammered out a word now and then, and looked with admiration at the hero of Irving's book, and with wonder at Mildred, who could talk so easily and brightly to so distinguished a man.

Colonel Bonneville showed them around the post, all the time keeping up an interesting conversation with Mr. Judson about the country through which they were to pass and its wild inhabitants, and giving him much valuable information. When the time came to say good-bye, he gave to each of the boys a strong-bladed hunting-knife, and a pair of beautifully decorated Indian moccasins to Mildred.

"A slight testimonial, as they would say in the Far East," he said, smiling, "of my appreciation of a most delightful visit with three most delightful children."

"Isn't he great?" Mildred affirmed as they rode away from the fort back to the camp.

"You bet!" was Ray's emphatic way of showing his approval of the sentiment and of Colonel Bonneville. "He's one of those men who can do things without bragging about them. I didn't hear anything that sounded the least like a brag from him all the time we were talking with him— Hello, Art! What's the matter?" for Arthur, who was riding close by his side, had suddenly reached out and caught hold of his arm. "Look out, or you'll pull me off my horse!"

"See there! There's Slim George!" and Arthur pointed to a blacksmith's shop that stood a few rods from the buildings of the fort and near the open door of which two men stood talking, while a couple of mules were being shod by the blacksmith. "I wonder who he is talking with? I'm going to tell Mr. Judson,"

and Arthur hurried back to Mr. Judson, who was a couple of rods behind, and pointed out the two men. As he did so a third man stepped out of the shop and joined the men near the door.

Arthur and Mr. Judson both started at the sight of this third man, and their eyes flashed angrily, for they had at once recognised him as the man of the dancing episode in Independence, and the thought of that hostile ball that had passed through Arthur's hat had come to both.

"Looks as if all our enemies were getting together, don't it?" Mr. Judson questioned. "That gambler and that whisky-barrel rider fellow I reckon don't have any love for you boys and Tom Rawlins, and the other man is Tom Pike, Scoot's old master, and I reckon he hates me 'bout as bad as he does poison since I knocked him down and made him sign Scoot's free papers—the miserable sneak-thief. I wonder how them three got together, and why they're together?" and Mr. Judson looked troubled. "Now, if Mildred wasn't along we'd stop to show your friend that hole in your hat and ask him to explain how he came to put it there; but being that we've got Dimples with us, I reckon we'd better hurry back to camp, and Tom Rawlins and I will return and try and hold a conflab with this interesting trio. I don't like the three of them being together," and again the troubled look came back on Mr. Judson's face. "There, they've seen us, and they've recognised us all right. Ride right along and act as if you didn't know them, or I am afraid they'll get scary and light out before Tom and I can get back."

The three men, the moment they caught sight of the

Judson party, turned their backs toward them and hurriedly entered the shop. Evidently they did not wish to be seen. This in itself was suspicious, and when taken in connection with the facts that one of the men, Tom Pike, had already attempted to rob the waggon of Mr. Judson, and that another, the gambler, had apparently followed him ever since he boarded the steamboat on the Ohio River, caused Mr. Judson far more anxiety than he cared to show. But if he could have overheard the conversation of the men a few minutes later when they stepped out of the shop away from the ears of the blacksmith after he and the children had passed from sight over the brow of a small hill, he would have made several startling discoveries that would have tended still more to increase his anxiety.

There were four men when they came out of the shop. Mike, Tom Pike's partner, who had been watching the blacksmith shoe the mules, had joined them, and the devil's quartet was complete.

"And so you know that long-legged fellow hoofing it behind the kids?" Tom Pike inquired of the gambler the moment they were out of earshot of the blacksmith.

"That I do," replied Slim George. "I know him, and I know them kids, and I know that big bull they call Tom Rawlins who is travelling with them, and I hate them all, especially the bull and the taller boy. But," and his small eyes snapped vindictively, "there's too good fishing there to disturb the water until we've caught the fish. That"—and he lowered his voice and glanced sharply toward the blacksmith—"that is the man I've been telling you about."

"What!" and Tom Pike whirled around and glared

at the hill over whose brow Mr. Judson had just vanished. "Not the fellow that's got the twenty-five thousand dollars stowed away somewhere in his waggon that we've been planning to confiscate?"

"Yes, that's him."

"Wh-h-e-w! Mike and I had our hooks in that waggon once!" and Tom Pike looked his astonishment and chagrin.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars!" and Mike's red face became redder and his round eyes rounder. "Do you remember that little chist I was 'bout to hand you when that little black devil grabbed you around th' legs an' began to yell? I reckoned then as how it was th' old man's cash-box. Twenty-five thousand dollars! An' to think I held it in these two hands an' dropped it like a scart kid!" and Mike's face pictured the disgust he felt at the idiocy that had allowed twenty-five thousand dollars to slip so easily through his fingers.

"But it isn't lost yet, boys," Slim George reminded them. "If we play our cards right we'll hold the twenty-five thousand dollars yet."

"Oh, we'll get the cash before they get to California, all right," Tom Pike affirmed confidently, "and, in addition, I'm counting on working out on his hide a little debt I owe that long-legged cuss."

"Same here," Mike echoed.

"Me, too," laughed Slim George. "Well, it's mighty queer, but we all seem to owe that gang a grudge. Even Bud Wilkes here glared at the two boys as if he would like to eat them both raw," and he turned to the man who had fired the ball through Arthur's hat.

"I could eat them raw," Bud Wilkes acquiesced

savagely. " 'Twill take more than the twenty-five thousand dollars to even up matters between me and that bull-like giant. I'll have his blood," and his snake-like eyes flamed as he thought of the humiliation and pain Big Tom Rawlins had caused him. " I'll have his blood! "

At this moment the blacksmith called from his shop that the mules were ready.

" Good! Now, I fancy, it will be healthy for us to get out of this neighbourhood some lively. I am sure they recognised us, and I wouldn't be surprised if Longlegs and Tom Rawlins hurried back after us as soon as the children are safe in camp, and so we'd better do the vanishing act and do it lively. Come on," and Slim George hastened into the shop after the mules, which were quickly hitched to the light spring waggon.

The four men climbed into the waggon and drove rapidly away, going in almost the opposite direction from that taken by Mr. Judson and the children, and thus it happened that when, half an hour later, Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins rode up to the blacksmith-shop on the backs of Black Duke and Getthere, not a sign of the four rascals was to be seen, and our friends were obliged to return to their camp with their mission unsatisfied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BUFFALO! BUFFALO!

MANY of the emigrants, discouraged and disheartened by their experiences in reaching Fort Kearney, and frightened by the fearful tales of what was yet to come, quit the trail here and started back for God's country, as they now called the land of civilisation they had left but a few short weeks before, selling or giving away or abandoning everything they had brought with them except what was needed for the return trip, while the majority of those who continued on the trail had found out by this time that they had started with more than they could carry, and now disposed of everything they thought they could possibly spare at any price they could get. Consequently our friends found no trouble whatever in procuring anything they needed at Fort Kearney, and at astonishingly low prices; flour and bacon, for example, selling at one cent per pound.

Four additional horses and two more yokes of oxen were bought here from disgusted and returning emigrants, the oxen and horses reshod, the waggon tires set, and everything put in the best possible shape for the continuance of the journey, which was begun again on the third morning after their arrival at the post.

The trail now ran along through the Platte Valley

and the two forks of the Platte for many miles. This valley, in the "good old days," as Jud Jimpson was never tired of calling them, was the favourite feeding place of vast herds of buffaloes that sometimes literally packed the valley from ridge to ridge, and the boys had listened to many exciting tales of the great buffalo hunts that had taken place here; and consequently, ever since they had entered the Platte Valley, they had been on the lookout for buffalo. But as day after day passed without a sign of a live buffalo—the ground was covered with bones and skulls and buffalo chips that told eloquently of the vastness of the herds that once had made their home here—Ray and Arthur began to fear that they would get to California without that promised buffalo hunt, while the disgust and rage of Jud Jimpson at this state of the buffalo country was too great for me to even attempt its description. In the old hunter's mind the association of Platte Valley with plenty of buffalo meat was fixed and inseparable; besides he, as well as everybody else, was getting exceedingly tired of a constant diet of salt pork, or "sow's belly," as he contemptuously called it, and all were looking forward anxiously to the time when they could feast on buffalo steaks and marrow-bones and the other buffalo dainties so highly extolled by the epicures of the plains.

"I don't believe there are any buffalo left alive in all this country," Ray grumbled one morning about a week after leaving Fort Kearney, as he and Arthur and Mildred were riding on a little ahead of the waggons. "Just look at those buffalo skulls scattered everywhere all over the valley, thicker than pumpkins in a cornfield. Why, it seems to me as if I have seen millions

and millions of buffalo skulls since leaving Fort Kearney, and they appear to be getting thicker and thicker every day. Looks as if some terribly fatal disease had killed them all off. At any rate, we haven't seen the first sign of a live buffalo yet, in spite of all of Jud Jimpson's promises. My, but I would like to get a shot at one!" and Ray's hand caressed the cool, smooth barrel of his rifle that lay in front of him across his saddle. "And I would like to kill one, they are so big and terrible-looking! Jud says their flesh is better eating than that of any other critter that ever wore horns— Hello, there are The Mourners, and in camp!"

The children had now reached the summit of a small hill, and saw in the valley beyond the huge waggon, and, feeding nearby, the five yokes of black oxen of their gloomy friends, The Mourners, while the men themselves appeared to be busy over a huge camp-fire.

"I wonder what they are doing, and why they are in camp?" Arthur questioned. "Looks as if they were cooking something. Come, let's gallop down and find out," and followed by Ray and Mildred, he set out for the camp of The Mourners.

At the sound of the galloping horses, one of the men looked up and saw the children.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, straightening up and holding up a long stick, one end of which was thrust through a huge piece of meat that he had been carefully roasting over the fire. "Buffalo! Buffalo! Hurrah!" and he waved the meat above his head.

"Where? Where?" shouted back the excited children, hurrying up as fast as they could make their horses go and looking in every direction for the buffalo.

"Here! Here!" and the man held up the meat on the end of his stick. "The finest roast that was ever eaten. Jump off your horses and have some."

The children accepted the invitation with alacrity, for it seemed months since they had had a taste of fresh meat of any kind, and this was buffalo meat! The noisy multitudes of emigrants had driven all kinds of game far from the trail, and for the past week or two not even the skill of Jud Jimpson had been able to replenish their larder by so much as a single jack-rabbit.

"Where did you find the buffaloes? Are there any left?" Ray inquired anxiously the moment he had swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of the rich juicy meat.

"Are there any left?" and the man laughed. "Well, I don't know 'bout there bein' any left now, seein' there was only fourteen billion, six hundred an' seventy-nine million, two hundred an' thirteen thousand, nine hundred an' eighty-three buffalo an' a calf in the herd that came mighty nigh a-transforming this outfit intew red prairie-mud 'bout sundown last night, jest over th' top of yonder low hill," and he pointed to a hill half a mile farther along on the trail. "We got the calf an' its maw an' a young heifer, an' came back here, where there's plenty of wood an' clean water, tew cook an' dry th' meat, for th' Lord only knows when we'll see another buffalo. Looked as if every livin' buffalo on th' face of th' earth was in that there herd, an' they were goin' south like ten million locomotives, full steam on. Best meat I ever ate. Have some more," and he passed the hunk of buffalo-meat again to the children. "Where's th' rest of th' folks?

You're th' kids 'long with that scarlet fever waggin, ain't you?"

"Yes," Arthur answered, laughing. "That is, if you mean Tom Rawlins's red waggon."

"I reckon that's th' man. A big feller, that looks as if he'd be th' right man tew tackle if you're lookin' for th' wrong side of trouble."

"That's Tom Rawlins to a T," Arthur declared emphatically, "and he and the others will be along in a few minutes. We rode ahead. My, but this meat does taste good!"

"Have some more," and the man sliced off another chunk of the roast buffalo and handed it to Arthur on the point of his knife.

For a few minutes the children ate and talked, and talked and ate buffalo, and then Ray suddenly turned and sprang on the back of his horse, his face flushing with excitement.

"Come on!" he cried. "I'm going to see if there aren't some of the buffaloes left," and he started off on the gallop toward the hill that hid the plain beyond, where The Mourners had nearly been run down the night before by a stampeding herd of buffalo.

Arthur and Mildred sprang on their horses, and shouting back their thanks to The Mourners, were soon galloping by the side of Ray.

"Oh, I do hope there are some buffalo there, even if it is only two or three!" Mildred exclaimed, as they galloped up the incline. "Wouldn't it be great news for Jud Jimpson?"

"Slow up! Slow up!" warned Ray. "If we dash over the top of the hill on the gallop, we'll frighten

away every buffalo in sight," and he pulled Getthere down to a walk.

Very cautiously the three children now rode toward the summit of the hill, and when near its top they dismounted, and, tying their horses to a clump of sage-brush, crept the rest of the way as stealthily as three Indians.

On the brow of the hill grew a thick cluster of sage-brush, and screened by this Ray and Arthur and Mildred reached the hilltop, whence they could look down on the valley beyond.

"Oh-h-h-h!" and Mildred drew in a long breath and stood transfixed with pleased astonishment, while her dilated eyes stared down on the plain below.

"Jee-my'-mee! Jee-my'-mee!" and Ray's eyes almost dropped out of his head. "Jee-my'-mee, I should think there were a few left!" and he gripped his rifle tightly. "I am sure I could kill that old bull from here."

"But you'd stampede the whole herd," warned Arthur. "My, I did not suppose there were as many buffaloes as that in the whole universe!" and his astonished eyes swept over the wide plain below. "Won't this be great news for Jud Jimpson?"

"Indeed it will!" Mildred exclaimed. "And I'm going to be the first one to tell him," and she darted away from the clump of sage-brush, down the hill to her pony, mounted, and sped away as fast as the swift legs of Beauty could carry her toward the distant hill, over the brow of which the heads of the lead-yoke of Jud Jimpson's oxen were just coming in sight.

"Come on, Art. Let's see if we can't get to the waggons before she does," and Ray started toward

Getthere with Arthur by his side, and they were not a rod behind Mildred as she sped down the hill.

"Buffalo! Buffalo! The plain is black with buffaloes!" shouted the excited girl as she rushed by The Mourners, who were staring in astonishment at the racing children.

"Buffalo! Buffalo!" echoed Ray and Arthur, striving with whip and spur to get ahead of Mildred and be the first to deliver the glorious news. "Millions of them!"

The distance from the hill where the race started to the hill on whose brow the Judson party had now halted to await the coming of the children, fearful of what might have happened to cause their headlong flight, was a little over a mile of smooth level prairie, and consequently a very fitting course to try the speed and endurance of the three ponies.

At first Ray's and Arthur's horses both gained on Mildred's Beauty, and when they passed The Mourners the three ponies were running almost abreast, with Getthere slightly in the lead, Black Duke a neck behind him, and Beauty a couple of necks behind Black Duke. A little farther on and Ray had increased his lead by a couple of horse's lengths, and now feeling quite sure of winning, he partly turned in his saddle and called back to Mildred: "I told you Getthere could beat Beauty in a long race, and just see how easy he is doing it."

This was an unfortunate boast for Ray, for tenderhearted Mildred up to this time had not used her whip on Beauty, but now, stung by his boast, she called out sharply and struck her horse with the whip. Beauty gave her head a knowing toss, as much as to say:

"Well, so you want me to show you what I can do, do you?" and stretching forth her neck she leaped forward at a rate of speed that soon brought her abreast with Black Duke, then ahead, then even with Getthere, then, with another burst of speed, she swept by Getthere, and up the hill to the waggons a good two rods in the lead.

"Buffalo! Buffalo!" yelled Mildred, as she dashed up to Jud Jimpson, her hair flying, her cheeks like twin roses. "Buffalo! Thousands, millions, billions of them! There!" and she turned to Ray, who had just pulled up Getthere by her side, "didn't I say I would be the first to tell Jud? And didn't I tell you that Beauty could beat Getthere any day and any distance?"

Now all was excitement. Everybody crowded around the three children to listen to their wonderful tale of the vast multitude of buffaloes that blackened the plain beyond the hill. Jud Jimpson seemed to renew his youth as he listened. His lank form straightened, his eyes dilated, his sallow cheeks flushed, and when he spoke his words came sharp and decisive.

"We'll camp right down there by th' side of Th' Mourners," he said, "an' then we'll get ready for th' hunt of our lives," and his eyes sparkled. "Now everybody move lively, for th' Lord only knows when some lunatic will come 'long an' stampede th' hull herd," and with voice and whip-lash, he urged the oxen down the hill, followed with equal haste by the other two waggons.

Never were the oxen unyoked and hobbled and the camp pitched more quickly. Then Jud Jimpson and Mr. Judson galloped off to the brow of the hill to have a look at the buffalo and the lay of the land and

to plan the attack, while the others made ready their weapons and their horses. In a short time Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson came galloping back, their faces flushed and their eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Makes me think of old times," Jud said, as he flung himself off his horse. "But we must waste no time. Everybody that's goin' on th' hunt get ready tew once. You don't need them rifles," and he turned to Ray and Arthur. "Pistols is th' thing tew hunt buffaloes a-horseback. Rifles are tew unhandy. Now, remember, an' ride up close on th' left side of th' buffalo an' shoot jest behind th' fore shoulder, an' then look out that th' old feller don't turn an' charge. A wounded buffalo, especially a bull, is a mighty tough customer, an' wouldn't think nothin' of tossin' a horse an' a kid like you skyhigh on his sharp horns. Jest keep control of yourselves an' your horses, an' shoot young cows. They're better eatin' an' less dangerous. Now get yourselves ready jest as soon as you can," and he hurried away to his waggon to get a fresh supply of ammunition and an extra pair of pistols.

Ray and Arthur had heard much of the two methods employed in hunting buffalo, and, theoretically, understood very well what was meant by the terms "running" and "approaching," as the two methods were called, and both knew that in the present case they were to "run" the buffalo; that is, they were to ride as close as possible to the herd without frightening it, and then the moment the buffaloes took fright, rush down upon them at full speed, each hunter selecting his victim, and, riding up close to his left side, shooting him when only a few feet away. They knew that a buffalo, although a speedy animal for one of so great bulk, is no

match for a horse, even when mounted, and is easily overtaken by a horseman. This method of killing buffalo is much more exciting and dangerous than "approaching," when the hunter crawls on the ground to within shooting distance of the game, or, concealing himself near a buffalo trail running to water, lies in wait and kills them from ambush, and Ray and Arthur were glad it was the way they were to do their killing, because, boy-like, they fancied the more excitement and danger the better.

For the next few minutes everybody was busy, carefully loading and priming pistols, tightening saddle-girths, and seeing that every strap and buckle was safe and sound; then Jud Jimpson gave the command to mount, and the little cavalcade started on a trot for the hill behind which the buffaloes were quietly feeding.

There were six men in the party, the three Mourners joining the hunt, and the two boys, while Mildred and Scoot had permission to ride to the top of the hill, and from there watch the progress of the sport. Scoot was mounted on the poorest of the four horses bought at Fort Kearney, a tall, raw-boned sorrel that had been given the suggestive name of Turpentine, and was very proud of his mount and of his ability to stay mounted even when the horse galloped.

It would be impossible to tell just how Ray and Arthur felt. This was their first buffalo hunt; in fact they had never before seen a buffalo except at a great distance, and now they were to rush down into the midst of an immense herd of the huge animals and kill as many as possible! But, I fancy, every one of my boy readers can picture out to himself just how he would have felt under like circumstances, and that will tell

him very nearly how Ray and Arthur felt as they rode toward the herd of buffalo on that clear July morning of the year 1849.

At last the crown of the hill was reached, and the prairie beyond lay beneath them. The sight was one calculated to stir the blood of any hunter. The plain half a mile below was almost black with buffaloes. A few old bulls stood in the outskirts of the herd, evidently doing guard duty. The rest of the immense herd were scattered about over the prairie as far as the sight could reach, and so thickly that there were spots acres in extent where the eye could not see the ground because of the buffalo that hid it. Many were quietly feeding on the grass, others were lying down, here and there bulls were fighting, and still others were rolling in the buffalo wallows or standing in pools of water, contentedly switching their short tails.

For a few minutes the hunters paused on the brow of the hill to observe this wonderful sight, and then began slowly riding down the slope toward the herd, every man and boy with eyes intent on the huge animals, ready the moment they became alarmed to strike their spurs into the sides of their horses and charge after them. Mildred and Scoot remained on the summit of the hill to watch the exciting contest from afar.

The old bulls in the outskirts of the herd were the first to notice their approach, but they did not seem to understand at once that the horses and men meant danger. A buffalo judges of an enemy more by scent than by sight, and a stiff wind, blowing directly from the herd toward the advancing hunters, prevented their scent from reaching the animals. They lifted their heads and looked at the horsemen for a few minutes

with sluggish curiosity, then they trotted a few steps in their direction, lowering their heads threateningly, stopped, as if half suspicioning danger, suddenly whirled about, and with short tails held stiffly up in the air, bounded off, giving the alarm to the rest of the herd, and suddenly transforming the plain into a black, seething, rushing mass of frightened buffaloes.

At this moment Jud Jimpson gave the order to charge, and the hunters, digging their spurs sharply into their horses' flanks, rushed after the running animals, as swiftly as whip and spur could make their horses go, each selecting his victim as he approached.

Imagine the excitement of Ray and Arthur during this mad ride. Every moment the buffaloes appeared to be growing larger, their aspect more appalling, until, to the two boys, the great shaggy monsters, with their enormous heads and shoulders bounding up and down as they leaped over the rough ground, presented a truly fearful sight. But not for an instant did they think of withdrawing from the hunt; rather their enthusiasm, their desire to kill one of the great brutes, increased with each leap of their horses. There was no thought of danger, only a desperate determination to get alongside of one of the huge beasts and shoot him, kill him. The lust of the hunt ran hotly through their young blood, driving out every sluggish, cowardly eddy and pool, and making them forgetful of all peril to self.

In a few minutes the air became filled with a fine dust, stirred into life by the innumerable hoofs, whose thundering gallop made the earth tremble. Through this dust cloud Ray saw dimly the animal he was pursuing—a huge bull, in spite of Jud's warning. Slowly



Leveled it at the Monster whose Panting Side Almost Touched the Muzzle.

Getthere, who had hunted buffalo before and knew the business much better than did his master, brought him nearer and nearer to the buffalo until he was almost abreast of the huge animal and so close that he might have reached out and laid his hand on the heaving rump. He knew that the moment to shoot—to shoot at his first buffalo—had come, and gripping his reins tightly in his left hand, he cocked his pistol, levelled it at the monster whose panting side almost touched the muzzle of the weapon, and pulled the trigger.

The shot brought about an abrupt change in the behaviour of the buffalo. He whirled half about and, maddened by the hurt, charged with bloodshot eyes and lowered head straight at Ray and Getthere.

The mad buffalo bull made a fearful sight, and no wonder Ray's horse and Ray himself wanted to get away from him as swiftly as possible. Foam and blood fell from his mouth and flecked with white and red the great shaggy mane. To the eyes of the frightened boy he looked as large as an elephant. There was no need for Ray to turn Getthere about. That intelligent animal wheeled on the instant he saw the buffalo's horns pointed in his direction, with a suddenness that almost sent Ray flying off in the opposite direction, and bounded away over the prairie at a speed that promised soon to leave the old lumbering buffalo bull far in the distance. But suddenly the horse's leg broke through the ground into a prairie-dog's hole, and down went the horse, sending Ray flying through the air over his head. The soft grass broke the boy's fall and saved him from serious injury. The horse, unhurt by his rough tumble, jumped to his feet and sprang away at full speed. For a rod or two the wounded bull chased

madly after the fleeing horse, then he stopped and began bellowing and tearing up the ground with his hoofs and shaking his huge head and glaring around with his bloodshot eyes, as if searching for the boy that had been hurled from the horse's back.

It was at this moment that Ray, who had been slightly stunned by his fall, jumped to his feet. Instantly the bloodshot eyes caught sight of him, and the next moment the horrified boy saw a mountain of raging flesh and bone and muscle, tipped with two sharp, short horns, plunging toward him, and knew that he was facing death.

There was but one thing for Ray to do—run, and he must do that with all possible quickness and speed; and run he did as he had never run before, and as he ran he cast hasty glances behind him. Each glance showed him the buffalo nearer, and his heart sank. If help did not come quickly all would be up with him. Now he could hear the deep, panting breathings of the huge beast not ten feet behind him, and every moment he expected to feel the thump of the great head striking his body, and the thrust of the sharp horns tearing his flesh. He turned his head for a last despairing look, and, as he did so, his foot caught in a bunch of grass and he was thrown violently to one side and to the ground, while the buffalo rushed harmlessly by, so close that one of his horns tore the boy's coat as he fell.

Ray sprang quickly to his feet and glanced swiftly around. Not one of the hunters was near, and the bare prairie offered not the slightest shelter. There seemed no possibility of escape, no hope of rescue from the wounded and furious buffalo that, after running blindly for a dozen rods, had already turned and was now

glaring furiously around, looking for the enemy that had so suddenly vanished from before his eyes. Getthere had stopped, and now stood some ten rods distant, with arched neck and ears pricked forward, his intelligent eyes watching the buffalo and his young master.

At sight of his horse Ray's heart gave a glad bound. If he could only get to him, and on his back, he would be safe! But the buffalo was not a dozen rods away, and it was a good ten rods to the horse! Then Ray remembered how he had trained Getthere to come at his call, how he had practised calling him, and then, running to meet him, had mounted him without stopping. If— He thrust his two fingers into his mouth, gave the call whistle, and started on the run for the horse.

The buffalo at this moment again caught sight of the running boy, and, with a low, rumbling bellow, lowered his head and charged after him.

Getthere heard the whistle, saw his young master running toward him, saw the buffalo bull charging behind him, and just as if he understood the fearful peril and the great need of haste, leaped forward to meet his master at full speed.

There was not two seconds to spare, for, as Ray sprang into the saddle and the brave little pony leaped out of the way of the furious buffalo, the sharp horns combed the horse's long tail. But fortunately in this case a miss, however close, was as good as a mile, and Ray was safe on the back of the gallant steed.

For a minute Ray clung, crying his joy and telling the pony what a brave little horse he was, to Getthere's neck, then he straightened up in his saddle and looked for the wounded buffalo. The great brute must not escape him now, and Ray's lips came together tightly,

and reaching down to the holster fastened to his saddle-bow, he drew out the remaining pistol and again started after the wounded bull.

The buffalo was now galloping off across the plains, but it did not take Getthere long to again place Ray close to his side, and this time the pistol was more carefully aimed and fired. As the second ball entered the huge body, the buffalo made a convulsive, staggering plunge forward, and then his forelegs doubled up underneath him and he fell to the ground, ploughing up the prairie sod with his horns; and Ray had killed his first buffalo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SINFUL FOUR AGAIN

IN the meantime Arthur was urging his horse at full speed after the buffalo he had selected—a young bull that proved to be very speedy, and almost a match for Black Duke. Arthur was greatly excited, and rode so fast and kept his eyes so constantly on the buffalo ahead of him that he took no notice of the topography of the country over which he was riding, nor of the distance or direction he was going. Suddenly the buffalo disappeared from before his eyes as if the ground had swallowed him up, and before he had time to check his horse or to recover from his astonishment he found himself plunging down the steep bank of a small creek, and in a moment more horse and rider were over head and ears in mud and water.

The bull scrambled up the opposite bank and rushed on over the prairie, and Arthur, covered with mud from head to heel and very much disgusted, let him go. He had had enough of buffalo running for that day, and as soon as he had himself and horse out of the mud and partly cleaned, he mounted and started to return to the camp.

But where was the camp?

Arthur sat on his horse and stared all around him. In whatever direction he looked his eyes met a bare,

level plain, enclosed on all sides by low-lying hills. Over one of those hills he had ridden in his mad chase after the buffalo bull; behind one of those hills was the camp and safety—but which? Arthur could not tell. They all looked alike to him. He sat still on his horse and listened, hoping to hear some sound—the report of a pistol or rifle, the shout of a man—that would tell him in what direction his friends were, but he had ridden far and not a sound of the hunt nor of the thundering gallop of the stampeding buffaloes, nor a noise of human making of any kind, reached his ears.

For a few minutes Arthur sat on his horse, trying to think of some method of determining which way to go, but he could see nothing, think of nothing that would be of help to him. All the surrounding hills looked alike strange, and he had not the slightest idea of the direction he had come. At last he determined to give Black Duke the reins, and trust to the wonderful instinct of his horse to bring him safe to his friends. He had read and heard of the marvellous ability of horses to find their way where all human skill was at fault, and here was certainly a fine opportunity of putting the matter to the test.

"It's up to you, Black Duke, I guess," he said, leaning forward and stroking his horse's neck, "whether or not we find our friends, for I am completely stumped, and so I'll just let you go where you please. Get up!" and without touching the reins he struck his spurs lightly into Black Duke's flanks.

Black Duke turned his head and looked inquiringly at his master, then he started off on a trot toward the hills, keeping a straight course, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

At the end of half an hour Arthur reached the foot of the hill toward which he had been riding, and with an anxiously beating heart hurried to its top.

Would he find the camp or some trace of his friends on the other side?

Ah, yes! There was the top of a covered waggon! And his heart gave a glad bound, and then almost stopped, for he saw in a little valley, on the shore of a small stream not forty rods from him, a light spring waggon and a dilapidated old prairie-schooner, and near the waggons a span of mules, a horse, and a couple of yokes of scrawny oxen, closely hobbled, feeding on the grass. Around a camp-fire built between the two waggons, sat four men, evidently feasting on buffalo steaks. At the first glance Arthur recognised three of these men—Slim George, Tom Pike, and Bud Wilkes, the man who had forced him to dance to the tune of his whip. The fourth man, a short, thick-set fellow, he took to be Tom Pike's partner, Mike, of whom he had heard from Mr. Judson.

For a minute Arthur was too surprised and confounded at this unexpected sight to do anything but sit and stare at the men from the back of Black Duke—the only men in all the world that he would not have been glad to see at this moment.

Slim George was sitting so that he caught sight of the boy the instant he appeared on the hilltop.

"Look, look there!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "There's one of them Judson kids as sure as I am a sinner! And alone! I'll bet the boy is lost. He must be miles from camp. Let's interview him," and placing his two hands to his mouth, he shouted:

"Hello! Hello there, boy! Come and have some buffalo-steak."

But Arthur, apparently, had no mind to be interviewed by that crowd, for at the call of Slim George he whirled his horse around and galloped down the opposite side of the hill.

"Well, he don't act as if he hankered after our company none much," laughed Bud Wilkes. "I reckon he remembered that bullet I sent through the brim of his hat the other day. But let's see what has become of him. I'm none anxious for him to bring the whole gang down on us unawares," and jumping quickly to his feet he caught up his rifle and started on the run for the hill behind which Arthur had vanished.

"The boy was alone," he said when he returned some ten minutes later. "Leastwise there was not another human in sight on the whole plain, and the kid was going as if he expected another bullet might be chasing after him any minute. Now," and he turned to Slim George, "while we're on the subject, we might just as well consider that plan of yours for squaring accounts and getting that twenty-five thousand dollars. The sooner it's done the better 'twill suit me," and his eyes flashed vindictively.

"Well, boys," Slim George answered, "the fellow that waits until his porridge cools won't get his tongue burnt, and I reckon this had better be a game of cooling the porridge before tackling it. It's just this way, as I look at it. That Judson crowd is bound for California, and so are we. They can't spend any of that money until they get to California, because there is no place to spend it; and, for the same reason, the money won't do us any good until we get to California.

Now, my idea is to let them keep the money for us until they get pretty near through or at least until they get beyond Salt Lake City, and then we can swoop down upon them and get the money and our revenge and be safe in the mines before any one can get on our track. I fancy it will be a mighty hard job to run a fellow down, once he is in the mines, where there are some hundreds of thousands of other men; but 'twould be a mighty easy job to run a man down along this here trail, because he's got to stick to the trail in this God-forsaken country or starve or lose his scalp or get lost himself, and no amount of gold is worth doing that for. 'Twon't be a hard trick to keep track of them until the right time comes to make the haul, seeing that we're all travelling in the same direction and at about the same rate of speed, and we can keep our eyes on them all the time, and if anything turns up to make it necessary to make the raid before that time, we'll be on hand and ready for business. Now, that's the way I look at this business, boys, and it seems to me that it's the right way if we want to do the thing up in good shape and get off with whole skins."

"That's what might be called waiting for vengeance with a vengeance," Tom Pike growled. "But there's wisdom in it, and I'm ready to say amen to it, provided I can have an extra dig at that long-legged cuss for the long wait."

"Me, too," echoed Mike. "An extra dig for me, too."

"Blamed if I can see the sense of waiting," grumbled Bud Wilkes. "I'm for getting that cash as soon as we can, and there's about ten million nail-pricks all over my hide that are calling loud for immediate vengeance.

I don't feel none much like waiting a month or two to square accounts with that bull-necked giant and them two smart kids. 'Twould suit me better if the thing was done to-night, and done good and brown."

"Even if you had to be hanged for it to-morrow?" queried Slim George scornfully. "Supposing we should play the trick to-night. To-morrow it would be known all up and down the trail—curious how fast news travels along this trail—and we wouldn't be safe anywhere. If we left the trail there's the Indians or starvation, and if we stuck to the trail we'd be caught sure before we reached California. I am as anxious as anybody for a chance to get considerably more than even with that Judson crowd, but I don't want to get my neck stretched for doing it. I say, wait until we get 'most through to California. Then we'll stand a good show of escaping with whole skins, and our vengeance will taste all the sweeter for the long wait."

"Maybe you're right," admitted Bud Wilkes unwillingly. "But if I get a good chance to put a hole through Tom Rawlins I'm going to do it," and his snake-like eyes sparkled. "No mortal can do Bud Wilkes the way he did and live long to boast of it."

"Tom Rawlins is big enough to take care of himself," and Slim George looked at the boaster a little disdainfully, "and from all I hear he is plenty able to do so, either with his fists or guns, so you'd better go a little careful or it will be you that will have a hole through his anatomy. Now, I fancy it would be a wise move to change our camp, for, like as not, that kid will tell about seeing us, and then Judson and Rawlins would be more than likely to want to look us up to ask you to explain about that hole you put through

the kid's hat. They are not the kind of men to let such an act go by unchallenged. You ought to put a curb-bit on that temper of yours, Bud."

Accordingly, but not without considerable grumbling from Bud Wilkes and Mike, the mules and oxen were hitched to the waggons and the quartet of rascals set out to find another camping-place, where they would feel more secure from the wrath of Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins and yet be able to keep watchful eyes upon them; and there we will leave them for the present.

Arthur, when he whirled his horse around and started down the hill, had but one thought—that of escaping from the dangerous presence of the four men as quickly as possible. He gave no attention whatever to the route he was taking, except to see that it led away from the hill behind which his enemies were encamped. For the moment he even forgot that he was lost, in his dread of these four men and in his anxiety to get out of their reach; but when he had ridden a mile or more and there was no sign of pursuit, his thoughts again turned to his unfortunate situation, and he again vainly tried to solve the problem of the whereabouts of the camp.

"Well, Black Duke, we'll give you another trial," he said at last. "You could not be expected to know that I did not wish to meet that crowd," and dropping the reins over the pommel of his saddle he allowed Black Duke to take his own course.

The pony, turning a little to the right, galloped swiftly toward the hills in that direction, and in half an hour more Arthur had again reached the hills. This time he rode to the top more cautiously, not knowing

what the other side of the hill might reveal to him, and saw, to his inexpressible joy, a man on horseback chasing a buffalo that was headed directly toward him. The buffalo was a quarter of a mile or more away, plunging along at a desperate rate of speed, and the man was another quarter of a mile behind the buffalo.

"That looks like Jud Jimpson!" Arthur exclaimed excitedly, pulling up his horse to watch the race. "If it wasn't for butting in I'd have a try at that buffalo," and he drew one of his still loaded pistols from the holster. "I declare, that buffalo looks queer! Great Scott, what's that on his back? Looks like a black monkey bobbing up and down! And hear it yell!—Why—why—why it's Scoot! It's Scoot, as sure as I am alive! How on earth did he get on the back of that wild buffalo bull? To the rescue!" and with a shout Arthur drove his spurs into Black Duke and dashed toward the oncoming buffalo.

"Sabe dis niggah! Sabe dis niggah!" came from the back of the bull in Scoot's shrill treble the moment he caught sight of Arthur. "I's done runned away wid! Sabe dis niggah! Fo' de lob ob de good Gawd, sabe dis niggah!"

Scoot was clinging desperately to the long hair of the buffalo's mane, while his little black body bounced up and down with every jump of the terror-stricken bull. His hat was gone, and the kinks of hair on the top of his head stood up almost straight, while the head itself was lifted above the shaggy mane very much after the manner a mud-turtle lifts its head out of its shell. His mouth was wide open, and the shrill jumble of screams and prayers and wild ejaculations of fright that issued from it could be heard for half a mile.

Evidently Scoot was not enjoying his novel ride, and it is no wonder that the buffalo bull could not comprehend what that yelling, bouncing, wiggling, squirming, clinging black thing was he had on his back, and that he became frantic with terror and rushed straight ahead over the prairie regardless of everything except the shrieking black imp that clung so tightly to his back.

Suddenly, just as Arthur had almost reached the side of the buffalo, one of the bull's forelegs went through a hole in the ground. Down went the huge animal, and Scoot was shot over his head like a black stone from a catapult, landing like a cat on his feet a rod ahead of the buffalo, and with a backward glance over his shoulder at the monster so close behind him, fled as fast as his short black legs could carry him.

The buffalo struggled quickly to his feet, caught sight of the fleeing negro boy, and with a bellow of rage charged after him. But by this time Black Duke had brought Arthur to the left side of the charging bull, and so close that when he stretched out his arm to aim his pistol the muzzle of the weapon almost touched the great heaving side.

Arthur knew that probably the life of Scoot depended on the accuracy of that one shot, and the thought steadied his arm and compelled him to wait until the sights told him that his aim was true before he pulled the trigger.

"Fire! Fire!" yelled Jud Jimpson, who was now not a dozen yards away. "Fire, or th' bull will kill th' nig!"

At that moment Arthur's finger pressed the trigger, and the heavy ball tore its way into the panting side straight through the throbbing heart, and the bull, with

a convulsive bound, plunged headlong to the ground, his horns ploughing up the sod not a yard behind Scoot's flying feet.

"That was a mighty close call for Scoot," Jud Jimpson said, riding up to Arthur, who sat on his horse looking down on the dead buffalo, his first buffalo; and every boy who reads this can imagine for himself how proud he felt that it was his own pistol, held by his own hand, that had killed the monster, and at the very first shot. "Hey, there!" and Jud turned to the still running negro. "Stop them black legs of yourn. Th' bull is dead."

Scoot turned his head, saw that the buffalo was no longer after him, stopped, and came timidly back to where Arthur and Jud sat on their horses, his little body wet with the sweat of his fear and exertions and all of a-tremble, and his black face looking as if somebody had spread a very thin coating of flour over it.

"Golly, I done nebber want to ride no buf'lo no mo'!" he exclaimed, attempting to smile. "I's gwine back to old Kentuck, whar dar am no cows like dat," and he rolled his eyes toward the dead buffalo.

"But how did you get on the back of that old bull?" Arthur asked. "And what has become of your horse?"

"Dat ol' scal'wag!" and Scoot straightened up angrily. "Dat ol' yeller rascallion! Jes' wait till dis niggah done lay his hands ag'in on dat ol' fool hoss! I's gwine to——"

"But," interrupted Arthur anxiously, "do tell us how you got on the back of that old bull."

"I's comin' to dat, I's comin' to dat," Scoot answered indignantly. "But jes' wait an' I'll wallup de skin off dat ol' rascallion ob a hoss, dat done runned

away wid me, an' dumped me on de back of dat ol' bull, like I's a no-'count, low-down niggah. Golly, but I done thought de debbel got dis niggah sho' dat time, ho'n, hoofs, an' all."

Later, after he had reached the camp under Jud Jimpson's guidance, Arthur learned the true story of Scoot's novel and thrilling ride. It seemed that Turpentine, the old rawboned horse that Scoot had so proudly mounted, had been a buffalo horse in his younger and speedier days, and when he saw the hunters charging after the buffaloes, he appeared to feel that it was his duty to charge, too, and accordingly, taking the bit between his teeth, he had charged, utterly regardless of the yelling protests and vain jerks of Scoot. The race was long, but at last he had brought Scoot up to the side of a huge bull, and then as the enraged animal turned suddenly to vent his fury on his enemies, the cunning old horse had whirled about so quickly that Scoot was thrown off, and landed right side up on the back of the bull, where he clung, like a little black monkey, with both hands to the long hair of the mane, yelling with terror. Fortunately, the buffalo in his mad flight was seen by Jud Jimpson, who at once gave chase, with the results already narrated.

It had been a great hunt. Fifteen buffaloes had been killed, the greater number of them being young cows, and I am sure my young readers can imagine the feast that followed, when told that of all kinds of meat, buffalo-meat, when taken from the body of a fat young cow, is considered by those who have tasted it the most delicious eating, and especially when they remember that our friends had not had a taste of fresh meat of any kind for days. The "hump," the tongue, tenderloin,

the bass and marrow bones are the buffalo tidbits, and when the animals are plenty no other parts are taken by the hunters, the rest being left on the ground; and so nutritious and digestible are these parts of a buffalo that an old hunter would seldom eat anything else when he could get the buffalo-meat. Give him a cup of strong coffee and all the buffalo "hump" he could devour and he was perfectly contented and never felt the want either of bread or vegetables.

The next morning The Mourners continued on their way, but the Judson party remained in camp here another day, preparing buffalo-meat for future use. This was done by cutting it into thin strips and drying it over a fire on a willow frame. When dry it was packed in sacks and placed in the waggons, to be eaten when they again ran out of fresh meat.

"Seems as if that Sinful Quartet were hanging pretty close to us," Mr. Judson said uneasily when Arthur told of the camp he had surprised in the little valley, "and yet we never get a sight of them except by chance. Well, I reckon they have a right to travel 'long this trail to California if they want to," and he said no more upon the subject, but Arthur could see that the apparent continual dodging of their footsteps by these four men troubled him more than a little.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOT FROM ACROSS THE CANYON

RAY and Arthur and Mildred by this time had become well hardened to their life on the plains. Their faces were tanned a deep healthful brown, their eyes shone clear and bright, and as they rode along on their horses by the side of the waggons or galloped ahead of the slow-moving oxen, they presented a delightful picture of vigorous, joyous youth. On the whole they were enjoying themselves greatly, but they had long since learned the truth of Jud Jimpson's oft-repeated words: "This here trip tew Californy won't be no Sunday-school picnic excursion." They had been obliged to endure many disagreeable things, to suffer many real hardships, and to do a great deal of hard, tiresome, monotonous work.

There were the mosquitoes and the other insects that bit or stung or crawled! At night, especially after our friends reached the valley of the Platte, these little pests swarmed down upon the camp in clouds that literally filled the air and ravenously attacked everything that had warm blood in it, driving everybody almost insane with the torment of their bites and making sleep or comfort of any kind next to impossible.

Then there were the snakes, many of them poisonous! They had to be constantly on the lookout for

them, especially at night, when they made their beds on the ground, and even with all their caution, Ray and Arthur had been horrified more than once to feel their cold forms gliding over their faces or hands in the darkness, or, on awakening in the morning, to find them coiled on their blankets.

Then they soon found that riding in the hot sun day after day over treeless prairies and plains frequently as level and monotonous and barren as floors, was anything but pleasant, especially when the hot dry dust rose in suffocating clouds, or after one of the frequent thunder-showers had drenched them to the skins and transformed the loose soil of the plains into soft mud on which, or rather in which, they must make their beds at night.

Add to these and a hundred other lesser discomforts, the necessity of often riding all day in the hot sun without a drop of water to drink, and then, when at length a pool of water was reached, to discover on raising the cup to the lips a troop of young tadpoles gaily sporting in its bottom; or the frequent need of getting down in the mud up to the waist to help dig or push or pull the waggon out of the mire of some river bottom or marshy spot in the trail; or the wearisome labour of digging, with spade and shovel, a waggon road through the steep bank of some river that must be crossed; or the still more difficult task of lowering the waggons with ropes down steep banks too hard to be dug; or— But why prolong the tale of their woes? Sufficient has been said to show that, however much enjoyment the children were getting out of the journey, they had their discomforts and trials and hardships to endure, as, indeed, we all have, no matter

where or how we are journeying through life, and the only wise thing to do is to face them cheerfully and bravely as, I am glad to say, Ray and Arthur and Mildred always faced those that came to them along the long trail to far-off California.

For the next few days after the great buffalo hunt our friends saw many small herds of buffaloes, usually feeding at a distance from the trail, and antelopes were plentiful, but time was far too precious for them to waste any of it in unnecessary hunting, and they trudged steadily on without stopping except for the noon-hour meal and rest and the camp at night. Every morning Jud Jimpson, sometimes accompanied by one of the boys, would make a short excursion from the trail to secure the fresh meat for the day, but this caused no delay, for, mounted on horses, it was easy for the hunters to overtake the slow-moving oxen after the buffaloes or antelopes had been slain and the meat procured. In this way they travelled slowly up the Platte Valley, anxious to reach Fort Laramie as soon as possible, where another stop of two or three days was to be made to rest the animals and to get everything in shape for the rough and hazardous trail across the mountains.

The scenery, as they advanced up the valley of the Platte, constantly became more rugged and picturesque, sometimes assuming the most fantastic shapes and resemblances to works of human architecture. The more prominent of these natural landmarks had been given names by the early *voyageurs*, as the employees of the Hudson Bay and Northwest Companies who first traversed this region were called; and Ray and Arthur and Mildred had heard so frequently, ever since their

start, of Court House Rocks, Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluffs, and Independence Rock, that they were very curious to see these wonderful formations. Consequently when, one afternoon, Jud Jimpson stopped his oxen on the brow of a small hill, and pointing with his ox-whip to the northwest, turned and yelled, "There's Chimney Rock," the children lost no time in getting to his side, each eager to be the one to get the first sight of this celebrated landmark.

"Where? Where?" Mildred shouted, as she pulled up Beauty by the side of the old hunter. "Where is it?" and her eyes eagerly searched the plains beyond, and "Where? Where?" echoed Ray and Arthur, as they came to a halt by the side of Mildred.

"There, that's th' Chimney, that tall chimney-like rock," and Jud's finger pointed to where a tall shaft of rock loomed above the surrounding country far to the northwest, "an' them's th' Court House, that pile of rocks with th' big dome-like rock a-top of 'em, that you can see jest a lettle this side of th' Chimney. Looks somethin' like th' Court House in St. Louis, an' that's how it got its name."

"Well, that surely does look enough like a chimney," Ray exclaimed, his eyes on the distant spire of rock, "to have a lot of black smoke belching out of its top right now!"

"And that pile of rocks does certainly look like the Court House in St. Louis," Arthur declared. "Don't you remember how we admired its great dome? And there it is, dome and all."

"Let's gallop on ahead and wait at the Court House for papa and the rest," Mildred proposed, "so that we can have more time to examine it. There's a string

of waggons all along the trail ahead, so there won't be any danger."

"Well, I reckon you needn't be in any rush 'bout startin' on that gallop," and Jud Jimpson chuckled, "seein' that them rocks are somethin' like forty miles from here."

"Oh, they can't be that far!" and Mildred turned doubtingly to the hunter. "They don't look over five miles away, and I thought sure we would camp near them to-night."

"I reckon if we get tew th' Chimney by th' day after tew-morrow night we'll be doin' pretty well," and Jud chuckled again. "You see this here atmosphere ain't clouded none with th' dirt an' smoke of civilisation, an' a feller can see more miles here than he can rods back in your old, dirty Eastern air. Ever hear th' story of th' Englishman th' first time he crossed th' plains? You see," he went on without pausing for the children's reply to his query, "this here Englishman, likes th' most of 'em, had an uncommon good opinion of himself, an' didn't take none tew kindly tew takin' advice, an' went right on followin' his own nose, which is a mighty bad trail tew follow on these here plains. Well, one day his guide came upon him standin' on th' bank of a leetle creek 'bout three feet wide, a-takin' off his clothes.

"'Goin' tew take a bath?' asked th' guide.

"'No,' answered th' Englisher, 'I'm goin' tew swim 'cross this bloomin' river.'

"'Why,' an' th' surprised guide stared blankly at th' Englishman, 'you can jump 'cross that leetle creek an' not half try.'

"'None of your bloomin' guff,' an' th' Englishman

continued takin' off his clothes. 'Yesterday I tried tew jump one of your blasted rivers that didn't look more'n three feet 'cross, an' landed in th' bloomin' mud up tew my bloody neck, b' Jove!'

"Now, I reckon you'd be 'bout as badly fooled as th' Englisher if you tried tew reach them rocks tew-night. G'lang! Haw, there, Buster!" and Jud's long lash cracked over the heads of his oxen, and with creakings of yokes and groanings of wheels the heavy waggon started down the hill.

Mildred and the boys laughed heartily over Jud's story of the Englishman, but they still cast doubting glances toward the Chimney and the Court House, and it was not until they had travelled all of the next day without seemingly getting any nearer to these landmarks that they became convinced that he had not exaggerated the distance to them, and could fully appreciate his story of the Englishman's indignation at the deceitfulness of our "bloomin'" rivers.

About noon on the following day they passed the Court House Rocks, but as this curious formation was some four or five miles from the trail, with intervening rivers to cross, they did not visit the Court House, and, continuing on their way, camped that night within a short distance of Chimney Rock, near a clear cool spring of delicious water that bubbled up from the ground at the base of the bluff.

The abundant grass and the cool spring of clear water made this seem almost an ideal camping ground to our friends, who were heartily tired of drinking the dirty water of the rivers and pools along the route, and they determined to spend the following day, which was Sunday, in camp here. Indeed, they never travelled

on Sunday unless obliged to, for, aside from all religious scruples, they found it wise to give their animals and themselves a rest one day out of seven, in order to keep in shape to continue the long journey to its distant end.

The Chimney was something like a mile from their camp, and early Sunday afternoon Mildred and the two boys, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Judson and Tom Rawlins, started out for a closer inspection of this celebrated landmark. They found the Chimney a nearly circular and perpendicular shaft some fifty feet high, set on a conical elevation, like a monument upon its base, the whole rising to a height of one hundred and seventy-five or two hundred feet above the green carpet of the surrounding plain, and forming a landmark that could be seen by the weary emigrants toiling along the trail from a distance of nearly fifty miles.

"Curious how that chimney-like pillar came to be left right on top of this rounded hill," Tom Rawlins speculated, as they stood by the side of the huge shaft. "Looks like a monument over some dead giant."

"Well, I reckon it is a sort of a monument," Mr. Judson observed, "left here by Nature to show on what a grand scale she works, for them geology fellows tell us that rocks like this have been formed by the rains and the winds cutting away the softer ground all around them, which would mean that once all this surrounding country was about on a level with the top of this rock, and maybe a good deal higher, because it's more than likely that the Chimney itself was once much higher than it is now."

"Whew, but that sounds like a whopper!" Arthur exclaimed, glancing over the great plain that surrounded

the Chimney, and mentally calculating the vast quantities of dirt Nature had had to move in order to perform this prodigy. "Wouldn't Nature make a master hand at digging ditches and removing hills and mountains, if we could only get her to work when and where we wanted her to?"

"Great idea!" Mr. Judson laughed. "Better get it patented. But now we'd better mosey along if we want to take a look at them bluffs over yonder before going back to camp," and he pointed to an odd-looking formation of rocks something like a mile from where they were standing.

They found that the rocks had been worn by time and the weather into fantastic resemblances of abutments and domes and castellated towers and battlements, cut by deep ravines and gulches that made them all but impassable to human feet.

"What a great place this would be to play hide-and-seek," Mildred laughed, looking down from where our party stood on a high shelf of projecting rocks into a perfect maze of intersecting canyons and gulches strewn with great rocks.

"A bully place," assented Ray, "only I fear the hider would have the time of his life finding himself—Hello! I wonder if that fellow over yonder across that canyon is having a game all by himself. I am sure I saw some one dodge in behind that great pile of rocks," and he pointed across a deep canyon to a huge pile of rocks some forty rods distant; and, even as he stood with his arm outstretched, a white puff of smoke shot out from among the rocks and Big Tom Rawlins uttered a sharp cry of pain, clapped both hands to his forehead, and fell over backward.

"Quick! Get behind that rock!" Mr. Judson shouted to the two boys, catching Mildred and her mother under each arm and half carrying them to the shelter of a huge rock that stood some two rods away, and then instantly leaping to where Tom Rawlins lay motionless.

But Ray and Arthur, forgetful of their own danger, were there before him, bending anxiously over the unconscious form of their big friend.

"Is he dead? Oh, is he dead?" and Ray raised an awed and horror-stricken face to Mr. Judson.

"Don't know," Mr. Judson answered shortly. "But we'll be dead if we don't get behind that rock right lively. Catch hold of his feet, quick!" and stooping, he gripped both arms under Tom Rawlins's shoulders, Ray and Arthur each caught hold of a leg, and in two seconds more all were safe behind the rock that sheltered Mildred and her mother.

"Leave Tom to the women," Mr. Judson commanded tersely, "and take your rifles and try and get a shot at the vermin from that side of the rock, while I try what I can do here. Be mighty careful 'bout showing yourselves!" he warned, as he hurried to his side of the rock, his blue eyes glittering like steel points.

Ray and Arthur gripped their rifles with hands that trembled just a little—remember this was their first battle and the horror of the white bloody face of Tom Rawlins was still before their eyes—and hastened to their appointed station, where a loose pile of broken rocks gave them protection, while the openings between the rocks offered them loopholes through which they might thrust their rifles with little chance of being seen by the enemy.

"Do you suppose it's Indians?" Arthur queried, as he pushed his rifle barrel between two rocks and glanced cautiously across the canyon whence the shot had come.

"I don't think the fellow I saw sneaking behind the rocks was an Indian— Look out!" and Ray ducked his head quickly and fell flat on his belly just as another puff of white smoke spurted out from among the rocks across the canyon, and a rifle ball struck with a hissing thud against the rock not a foot above Ray's head.

Both Mr. Judson and Arthur fired at the puff of smoke, and were answered by a derisive triumphant yell, followed by the words, "I got the one I want," and a mocking laugh, which in a few minutes was repeated from a high ridge of rocks some forty rods farther away, and the three watchers saw a man leap upon the ridge, pause for an instant to shake his rifle defiantly in their direction, and then vanish down the opposite side.

All three fired, but the distance was so great and the time to take aim so brief that probably not a bullet touched the assassin.

"The cowardly murderer!" and Mr. Judson turned a white, set face to the two boys. "If he got Tom I'll hunt him down if it takes until I'm white-haired. Now, just keep close watch to see if there are any more of the villains. I'm going to see how Tom is," and he hurried to where Mrs. Judson and Mildred were bending over Tom Rawlins.

"Hurrah!" he shouted a moment later. "Tom is all right! The ball just cut a swath of hair and hide off the top of his head and stunned him. One of you

boys run down to the spring at the foot of the bluff and hurry back with a hatful of water."

Ray jumped to his feet and ran after the water, while Arthur remained on guard behind the rocks until he came back, when, feeling assured that there had been only the one man and that he had gone, he joined the group gathered around Tom Rawlins.

"Coming to have a look at the corpse?" Tom Rawlins greeted him with a laugh. "Well, it's not my funeral this time, but 'twill be somebody's funeral sure if I ever come within shooting distance of that cowardly assassin and know it," and his voice hardened. "Did any of you see who it was? Didn't know I had an enemy on the whole trail to California, unless it's them two skunks, Bud Wilkes and Slim George. Reckon they both hate me 'bout the same as they do poison."

"No," answered Mr. Judson slowly. "I couldn't swear that I recognised the man that fired that shot, but I guess you're not far out of the way, Tom, when you mention Bud Wilkes. The man was about his build and the act is just what one might expect of that sneaking ornery cuss. How are you feeling? Strong enough to walk back to camp, or had I better send the boys after the horses?"

"Oh, I'll be as good a man as I ever was in about ten minutes," Tom Rawlins answered heartily. "The ball didn't do any particular damage, just sort of stunned me. You see, a thick skull is a mighty good thing to have sometimes, boys," and he turned to Ray and Arthur. "I reckon, if you will look, you will find a flattened piece of lead lying on the ground near where I fell," he added with a laugh.

Tom Rawlins proved a true prophet, for at the end of ten minutes he was on his feet and ready to start back for the camp, which was safely reached and without further adventures befalling our friends, just as the sun sank into an ocean of red glory below the far western plains.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ON THE TRAIL BEYOND FORT LARAMIE

THE next day's travel was a hard one on man and beast. The trail, some three or four miles from the Chimney Rock, gradually turned from the river in order to pass behind Scott's Bluffs, a point where a spur from the main ridge comes down so close to the river that it leaves no room for the passage of waggons. Between these two places, the Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluffs, a distance of over thirty miles, our friends found no water, and were obliged to go on until they reached the Bluffs, which was not accomplished until after nine o'clock at night, when everybody—men, women and children, and horses and oxen —were completely worn out, for the day had been oppressively hot and the gnats and the mosquitoes had given neither human nor beast a moment's peace. Here, to their great delight, they found a delicious spring, as if to reward them for the hardships of the day, and joyfully went into camp within a few rods of its cool waters.

The start the next morning was delayed until nearly noon, in order to get a couple of oxen shod and the tires on the waggon wheels reset by an enterprising blacksmith that had set up a temporary shop in this lonely place, to gather in the gold from the passing

emigrants, who nearly always needed his service after their three hundred mile drive from Fort Kearney. The man lived in an Indian lodge, but had built a log shanty by the side of the trail. The blacksmith shop was in one end of this shanty, and in the other end he kept a grog-shop and a kind of a grocery. Evidently he had found a gold mine here without the trouble of going clear through to California after it, for he had all the work he could do and charged what he pleased, and when he did not care to work himself he got seventy-five cents an hour for the use of his tools and shop. Then his "store" was a paying institution. He bought nearly all his goods of the emigrants, and always at a great sacrifice, and sold them again to other emigrants at an equally great profit.

"Now, why should I be going clear across them mountains and over the desert beyond, suffering all kinds of hardships and like as not getting killed or starved, just to dig gold up out of the ground, when I can get the gold right here and without digging, and get it already coined?" he protested to Ray and Arthur, who had ventured to wonder how he had escaped the gold fever. "See that waggon?" and he pointed to a large double waggon in good condition that stood near his shop. "I bought that t'other day of one of your disgusted gold-seekers who had lost all his critters and was going back to God's country, for seventy-five cents, and he was glad to get that; and this morning I sold it to another emigrant whose waggon got smashed falling down a steep river bank, for thirty-five dollars, and he was mighty glad to get it at that price. And that flour and bacon I bought along with the waggon of the same feller for one cent a pound,

and I've sold nearly all of it for twenty-five cents a pound. No, I reckon as long as my head is level I'll stay right here and work this gold mine," and he grinned appreciatively when Ray and Arthur both "reckoned" his head was as level as a waveless lake.

As Ray and Arthur turned to go from the blacksmith they saw Mildred hurrying toward them from the waggon with a book in her hand.

"Oh, boys!" she cried. "Don't you remember this is the place where that poor man Scott died, who was taken ill and deserted by his comrades after dragging himself sixty miles to this spot? That is why the bluffs are called Scott's Bluffs. They are that poor man's only monument. Washington Irving tells all about it in his 'Bonneville's Adventures.' Come to the waggon and I will read you the story," and accompanied by the two boys she returned to the waggon, where she read aloud Irving's account of the melancholy circumstances that gave these picturesque bluffs their name.

The journey from Scott's Bluffs to Fort Laramie, a distance of some fifty miles, was made without mishap or adventures of sufficient interest to need recording here.

Fort Laramie, formerly known as Fort John, had recently been purchased by the United States from the American Fur Company, and was garrisoned by two companies of infantry and one of mounted rifles. The little fort was built of sun-dried bricks, and had walls nearly fifteen feet high, which were surmounted by a slender palisade and overlooked by two clay bastions. In Ray's and Arthur's eyes this little army post, with its well-dressed officers and men, made quite an imposing appearance, and it was pleasing to know that the

strong arm of the United States was stretched out, even into these wild wastes of mountains and plains, to protect them.

Our friends found many emigrants encamped on the plains surrounding Fort Laramie, recruiting their animals, repairing their waggons, and, as it were, taking a long breath before making the plunge into the wilderness across the Rocky Mountains to Fort Bridger, on Black's Fork of Green River, four hundred miles away, and the first human habitation to be seen after leaving Fort Laramie. Here, as at Fort Kearney, they found a few who had become discouraged and were going back to the "States," and these were selling out everything they could spare for anything they could get.

All along the trail there had come repeated rumours of serious trouble with the Indians beyond Fort Laramie. Small parties of emigrants were reported to have been attacked and massacred, and even large waggon trains were said to have been beset by hundreds of whooping savages, who had been driven off only after hours of hard fighting, while the horses and oxen were in constant danger of being stolen and must be most carefully guarded day and night. The commandant at the fort verified these rumours in part, and advised Mr. Judson to use the utmost caution, once beyond the protecting arm of Fort Laramie, and under no circumstances to allow any member of the party to go far from the trail.

Up to this time our party had had little trouble with the Indians. They had seen many of them, and often they had been a great nuisance about the camp and along the trail, on account of their petty thieveries and

constant begging, but, with the exception of Ray's adventure with the Pawnee horse-thief, all their dealings with the redmen had been of the most friendly and prosaic nature. Indeed, had it not been for their memories of the Delaware chief, Eagle Feather, and his companions, Ray and Arthur would have fancied all Indians beggars and thieves, and that the majority of them were little better than worthless vagabonds and far too cowardly and lazy to make successful warriors. They could drink all the whisky they could get hold of and steal everything they could lay their hands on, and stalk about the camp in their dirt and rags and feathers and paint, brazenly begging for anything that they wanted that they could not steal, but always stealing it by preference if they could; and that, so far as Ray and Arthur were able to judge from their own observations, was the extent of their accomplishments, and consequently they had become a little contemptuous of the noble redman. However, the boys were soon to learn that they had other and even less agreeable accomplishments.

The Judson party remained in camp at Fort Laramie, resting their horses and oxen and themselves and having everything put in the best possible shape for the long rough journey across the mountains, until the Monday following their arrival, when they again continued on their way over the long trail to California.

The road now became constantly rougher and more broken, and consequently more difficult for the passage of heavily loaded waggons, and was strewn with fragments of burnt waggons and goods and merchandise of every description, that the desperate emigrants had thrown away in their efforts to relieve their weary,

overburdened animals, and almost anything in the way of tools or household goods or provisions could be had for the picking up.

Arthur amused and interested himself one day by writing down a list of the various things seen along the trail during that day that had been abandoned by the unfortunate gold-seekers, who, either on account of the loss of cattle or because of their worn-out and exhausted condition, had been forced to throw away everything but the barest necessities, and sometimes even to continue the long journey on foot with all their effects strapped to their backs. When they camped at night Arthur read over this melancholy evidence of the difficulties that had been encountered by those who had gone on before, and a surprising enumeration it was even to those who had seen the things with their own eyes! But to us, who live in these later days when luxurious palace cars will carry us in a few hours over practically the same route that it took those venturesome emigrants so many toilsome weeks to traverse, the list is a revelation of the pluck and the courage and the endurance of these Argonauts of the Western World. Here is the list. Read it, boys, and ponder over the thought of what it cost our fathers in suffering and in treasure to develop the greatness of our great nation.

This is what Arthur read:

"Early in the morning passed the still burning fragments of a dozen or more waggons that had been broken up and set on fire. Near by, in one big heap, was six or seven hundred weight of bacon. On the ground, scattered all around, were boxes, women's bonnets, trunks, a lot of waggon wheels and boxes, two cooking-stoves, a lot of tinware and dishes and things

to cook with, two tables, a baby's carriage and a cradle, and a lot of other stuff that I didn't have time to write down. A little to one side of the trail lay six dead oxen. About a mile farther on passed the bodies of two more dead oxen and a horse, and a lot of white beans and another pile of bacon. Farther on passed a dead cow—more white beans—two freshly made graves side by side—carpenter's planes and chisels—more white beans—two feather beds and a bureau—the grave of a child—a dead mule—more white beans and a small pile of bacon—two heavy blacksmith's anvils and a bellows, a lot of bars of iron and blacksmith's tools—a large broken mirror and a trunk—more white beans—two good overcoats and a bundle of bedding and a large trunk—a plough and two spades—a large grindstone and two axes—a woman's shawl and bonnet and a large box full of stuff. About four o'clock in the afternoon, came to another lot of dead oxen and a pile of broken and partly burnt waggons. On the ground, scattered around the waggons, were three beds and a lot of bedding, four stoves, three large trunks, two bureaus, a pile of overcoats and blankets and other clothing, a cradle, about a dozen bushels of white beans and about a hundred pounds of bacon, blacksmith's anvils and bellows, crowbars, bars of iron and steel, two sledge-hammers and other blacksmith's tools, three big chunks of lead, baking-ovens, a lot of kegs and barrels, augers, chisels, planes, and other carpenter's tools, and a whole lot of other stuff that I couldn't take the time to write down. A mile or two farther on, passed a grave that the wolves had dug up—more white beans—two dead mules and a steer—Jud picked up a good rifle and kept it—two saddles and a harness. Around

the spring where we camped at night found six dead oxen, two dead mules, three dead cows, four broken and partly burnt waggons, a pile of bacon and a lot more white beans, and a big lot of other stuff, such as stoves, dishes, trunks, and such things, and the graves of a baby and two grown-ups." *

And this is but the record of one day! And there were many days during which that record might have been duplicated!

At the North Fork of the Platte, a distance of some one hundred and twenty miles from Fort Laramie, an ingenious and courageous man had established a ferry for the purpose of carrying across the river, which here was rough and dangerous, the emigrants and their waggons at two dollars a waggon.

"That's a mighty curious and uncertain-looking ferryboat, stranger," Mr. Judson said to the ferryman as he stood on the banks of the river regarding doubtfully the unique ferryboat and its owner. "And I reckon it's almost as uncertain and dangerous as the river itself; but, betwixt and between the two, I'll risk the ferry, so get her ready for this outfit as speedily as possible."

The ferryboat was, indeed, a curious and uncertain-looking affair, made by fastening seven canoes, dug from cottonwood logs, together side by side with poles.

* This list is made up from an account of the things actually found along the trail by Captain Howard Stansbury of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, United States Army, who made the journey from Fort Leavenworth to Salt Lake City, accompanied by a number of emigrants on their way to the gold mines of California, during the summer of 1849, as given in his report to his chief.

A couple of hewn logs laid across the top of these afforded a resting-place for the wheels of the waggon, while a rope, stretched across the river and fastened at both ends to the shores, to which the ferryboat was attached, furnished the means of locomotion. Only the waggons and the human beings could be carried over the river on this rude craft. The animals were obliged to ferry themselves across with their own legs, which they did in safety after a little urging.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred perched themselves on the seat of the first waggon to be taken across, while Mr. and Mrs. Judson stood on the hewn logs by the side of the waggon. All went well until they were within a couple of rods of the opposite shore, when a swirling eddy suddenly struck the unwieldy raft, the boat gave a violent lurch sideways, causing one of the front waggon-wheels to slip off its support and to fall down between two of the canoes, and throwing Mildred from her seat into the water. The river was swollen with recent rains, and deep and swift, and before a hand could be outstretched to catch her, the rapid current had borne the unfortunate girl beyond reach. But hardly had her body struck the water when it was followed by two others, and Ray and Arthur were swimming desperately in the wake of the struggling girl.

Ray was the first to reach Mildred's side.

"Keep cool. There is no danger, we are so near the shore," he admonished, catching hold of one of her arms and turning toward the shore.

But Mildred was in a frenzy of fright, and incapable of reasoning, and wildly throwing both arms around Ray she clung to him with all her strength, rendering him almost helpless, and in a moment both

were under the water. When they again came to the surface, Arthur had reached their sides, and it was fortunate for Ray and Mildred that he had, for so tightly were Mildred's arms clenched around Ray's neck that it was impossible for him to loosen them, and both would have soon drowned.

Indeed, it was only after a desperate struggle that the two boys finally succeeded in getting the frantic girl near enough to the shore to catch hold of a long pole that the excited ferryman was holding out to them, when the three were quickly pulled to the safety of the land.

Mildred was almost unconscious, and Ray and Arthur were completely exhausted by their terrible struggle in the swirling waters.

"You'd have made it an even thirty, if you'd have went under, that th' Platte has got since I came here," the ferryman informed them as he pulled the children to the shore. "You're mighty quick-motioned young fellers," and his eyes rested admiringly on Ray and Arthur, "an' 'twas mighty lucky for th' leetle gal that you be. 'Tain't th' custom of th' Platte tew give up its hold on anything that it gets its wet arms around. Shake. You're brave lads," and he gripped each one of them by the hand.

"We're used to the water, and can swim 'most as good as fishes, and the wetting wasn't nothing," Ray explained, as if fearful of receiving too much credit for his bravery.

"No, of course 'twasn't nothing," and Mr. Judson gripped the hands of Ray and Arthur hard and fast. "Of course 'twasn't nothing to you boys, but—" and his voice choked—"'twas a whole lot to me and Cat

and Dimples," and his eyes turned to where Mrs. Judson stood with Mildred in her arms. "Thank God for sending you two boys along with us!" and he shook their hands until Arthur and Ray thought he would shake their arms loose from their shoulders. "Now, get into the waggon and get into some dry clothes," and he gave the two lads a push toward the waggon, which had been safely drawn up on the land.

The other waggons and passengers were carried across the river without accident, and the journey was at once resumed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

INDIANS! INDIANS!

HELLO, there's another News Exchange and Post Office!" Ray, who had galloped a dozen rods ahead of the slow-moving oxen to the summit of a small ridge, shouted back to Mildred and Arthur late in the afternoon of the day following the day of their adventure at the North Fork. "Wonder if there are any letters for us. Come on. Let's see what the news is," and he galloped down the other side of the ridge to a spot where a number of huge rocks thrust themselves up out of the sandy plain in such a way as to form a tolerable dry cave, some ten feet deep by six or seven feet high, with a flat bottom covered with clean white sand. In front of this cave a pole, driven down deep in the sand, had nailed to its top a board on which some one had rudely printed in big black letters:

CALIFORNIA EMIGRANTS' POST OFFICE AND NEWS EXCHANGE

It was this large sign that had caught Ray's eyes and caused him to shout back to Mildred and Arthur, who had joined him as quickly as their horses' legs could bring them, for these unique "Newspapers" and

" Post Offices " of the trail were a source of the greatest interest and amusement to all who journeyed over its lonely, dreary length, and especially to Ray and Arthur and Mildred, who on several occasions had even found " letters " for themselves left by some acquaintance of the trail who had passed on ahead of them. Then there was always valuable information concerning the nature of the trail ahead to be found scribbled on the " Post Office " walls or written on papers thrust in the split ends of sticks and stuck up in the ground, while many of the messages left were as amusing and witty as they were interesting.

There were many of these " Post Offices," as the children called them, scattered along the trail, where the passing emigrants wrote their names, the date of their passing, the state of their health and the condition of their animals, and left their messages for friends and acquaintances who might be expected to follow, while those who had already been over the trail and were returning, left many valuable items of information concerning the fords, the grass, wood, and water, and the condition of the road on ahead. It was thus, as well as by word of mouth, that the intelligence of the trail passed back and forth, and the emigrants came to know the names, origin, and character of most of the companies in the long white line of moving waggons stretching half way across a great continent.

Sometimes these messages and names were written on the smooth, flat surface of some wayside rock. Such was " Register Rock." Again they were nailed to trees and stumps or cut in the wood and rock with chisel and knife or inscribed on the bleached front of buffalo

skulls and shoulder-blades and left by the trail side. But most frequently they were written on paper, tightly folded, and thrust into the split end of a stick, which was stuck up in the ground in some sheltered spot visible from the trail. Caves and crevices in the rocks, within sight of the trail, were always utilised for "Post Offices" and "News Exchanges," because of the protection from the weather they gave the "mail"; and it was to one of such that the children had now come.

The moment Ray and Arthur and Mildred reached the cave they jumped off their horses and began eagerly examining the messages and names written on the walls of the cave or on pieces of paper thrust into the split ends of pointed sticks, which were stuck upright in the sand that covered the bottom of the cave, reading aloud such as interested them most.

"Oh, listen to this," Mildred laughed, reading:

If I'd knowed what was before me, I'd never broke out of jail to git to Californee.

"'About forty miles to Independence Rock,'" read Arthur. "'Mosquitoes and gnats and snakes is the only things that grow along the trail.'"

"'Don't let your critters drink of the water in Ded Cow Crik,'" read another phonetic warning. "'It's pisen.'"

"'Grass scarce as hen's teeth atween here and the Sweetwater—sand powerful bad—water not fit for a skunk to drink,'" Ray read. "Well, that's encouraging——"

"Listen to this," Arthur broke in, excitedly reading:

All emigrants are warned to beware of Indians between here and the Sweetwater Valley; and especially cautioned not to travel in small parties, but, when possible, to join together in large trains for mutual protection; and to keep a most vigilant guard during the hours of the night; and to corral all animals within the circle of the waggons.

"And it's signed," Arthur continued, "by Captain Duncan, Mounted Rifles, United States Army, stationed at Fort Laramie, and dated only two days back; so it's straight, and means we'll have to keep our eyes open if we don't want to get scalped."

"Do look here!" Mildred suddenly cried, pulling a piece of torn wrapping paper from a split stick. "I—I—I think this must be meant for Tom Rawlins," and her face whitened.

"Well, Tom Rawlins is right on the spot," laughed the big fellow, extending his hand for the torn paper. "Wonder if it's from my best girl," and he grinned, but his face sobered the moment he read what had been written on the torn slip of paper. "The skunk! There won't be any chance for a next shot if I see him first. Read that," and he handed the paper to Jedidiah Judson, who had entered the cave with him.

This was what Mr. Judson read, written with red ink—or blood:

To the Big Red Bull:

Thought I got you sure the tother day at the Bluffs; but the next shot will do the business.

The paper was unsigned except by a huge blot of red.

"The cowardly sneak! He's more to be feared than a brave man, because you can't tell when, nor how,

nor where he's apt to strike. Look out for him, Tom," and Mr. Judson handed the paper back to Tom Rawlins.

"Now, jest take a squint at that notice," Jud Jimpson said, pointing to Captain Duncan's warning. "I reckon we'd better pay strict 'tention tew what that paper says. Leastwise I've always found that them army officers never warns without reasons."

Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins at once read over the warning, and then the three men held a council of war, and it was determined to push on with all possible speed, in the hope of overtaking in a day or two a large company of emigrants that had passed the "Post Office" only the morning of the day before, and who, on account of their numbers and the probable condition of their oxen, would not be likely to travel nearly as fast as our friends could if hard pushed. Usually the Judson party had had no lack of company, but for the past two days, owing probably to the concentration of the emigrants into large companies on account of their fear of the Indians, they had been travelling almost entirely by themselves, and when they reached the "Post Office" there was not another emigrant in sight up or down the trail, something that had seldom occurred before.

"Now, I'll jest ride on a few rods ahead, an' make sure we don't run intew no ambush," Jud Jimpson said when our friends were ready to resume their journey. "You tew boys can take turns drivin' Tom's oxen, an' Tom'll drive mine. Everybody keep their guns loaded an' ready for instant business. 'Tain't likely we'll see no Injuns, but if we do, an' they're hostile, we'll need our guns mighty sudden," and jumping on the back

of one of the horses he galloped on a quarter of a mile ahead of the waggons.

Unfortunately, the trail now ran through a deep, heavy, white sand, hard on the human beings, harder on the horses, and hardest of all on the oxen drawing the heavy waggons; consequently they were compelled to travel slowly, and when they camped at night they were obliged to turn aside a mile or more from the trail in order to find grass and water for the wearied animals.

That night, for the first time when there was fuel, no camp-fire was built, and when the animals had been watered and had eaten their fill of grass, they were driven into a corral formed by the three waggons drawn up in a circle, and with the gaps between fenced by strong ropes stretched from waggon to waggon and firmly fastened.

Ray and Arthur and Tom Rawlins stood on guard during the first hours of that long, anxious night. At one o'clock they were relieved by Jud Jimpson and Mr. Judson. But the night passed quietly, without a disturbance of any kind, and by early sunrise of the next morning the oxen were yoked to the waggons and our party were again on their way.

About nine o'clock Jud Jimpson, who was riding nearly half a mile in advance of the waggons, suddenly whirled his horse about on reaching the summit of a low ridge that lay between two small valleys, and galloped swiftly back toward the waggons.

Instantly the waggons were halted.

"Get in the waggon with your mother!" Mr. Judson called sharply to Mildred, who was riding by the side of Arthur near Ray, who was driving Tom Rawlins's oxen.

"Wheel the waggons into a half circle facing the ridge, and get the oxen and horses inside the circle," he directed Tom Rawlins and the two boys.

In three minutes this had been done, and all faces turned anxiously to Jud Jimpson, who galloped up at that moment at full speed.

"It's Injuns!" he cried, as he flung himself off the back of his horse and quickly tied him to one of the waggon-wheels. "A war-party of Blackfeet, th' ugliest vermin on all these plains; but, thank God, there's not more'n a couple of dozen of 'em, an' I reckon we're more'n a match for twice that number. Good!" and his bright eyes flashed a swift glance over the surrounding plain. "Not even a blade of grass for th' red devils tew hide behind. Now, jest git them tent-bags, an' th' other bags an' boxes an' things out of th' waggins an' pile 'em up under th' middle waggin for th' women folks an' yunks tew git behind. Sum of them Injuns have got guns, an' a waggin-cover is a mighty poor protection 'g'inst bullets, or arrows either. They'll be ridin' over th' top of that ridge in 'bout ten minutes, so we'll have tew git a hustle on if we're ready for 'em," and Jud ran to his own waggon, and, helped by his wife, began throwing out such things as would serve for the barricade.

In five minutes, so swiftly did everybody work, the middle waggon was tightly barricaded with bags, boxes, and other things taken from the waggons, and the "women folks an' th' yunks" were safely behind its shelter.

"Now," and Jud Jimpson's eyes fell on the cattle and horses huddled together near the centre of the semi-circle, "hobble them critters as quick as God'll

let you. We sure don't want no stampedin' of them animals."

In a very short time the "critters" were all hobbled, but not a moment too soon, for as the last hobble was fastened around the legs of the last ox, the heads of the Indians appeared above the top of the ridge.

"There they come!" shouted Ray excitedly.

"Everybody with rifles git where they can use 'em best an' protect themselves best, an' don't fire a shot till I give th' word," Jud Jimpson directed, springing behind the hub of one of the front wheels of his own waggon, and resting the long barrel of his rifle on one of its spokes.

Arthur and Ray quickly ensconced themselves, at Mr. Judson's bidding, behind either end of the barricaded waggon, while Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins protected themselves as best they could back of the remaining waggon.

The Indians halted on the brow of the ridge half a mile away, and stared excitedly at the little company of emigrants, apparently studying how best to make the attack. There were twenty-three of them, dressed in all their war-finery and mounted on their war-ponies.

"Keep down close to the ground, all you women folks and kids, and don't do any peeking," Mr. Judson called to the little crowd behind the barricade. "We men can give the Indians all the attention they need, I reckon," and his jaws came together grimly. "Don't get scary when the circus begins. 'Twill be mostly noise. Them Indians won't come close enough to do much else than yell after our first volley. Keep cool and fire steady, boys— Ah, here they come!"

As Mr. Judson spoke, the Indians charged furiously

down the ridge straight toward the emigrants, brandishing their weapons and yelling their war-cries.

They made a thrilling sight, one to cause the red blood to jump in the veins and the muscles to grow tense and the breath to come in quick gasps; and no wonder that, for the first few moments of that fearful on-rush of yelling savages, the hands of Ray and Arthur shook so they could hardly hold their rifles, and that Scoot began burrowing in the sand, like a frightened badger, while Mildred clung trembling to her mother, and the Jimpson family huddled together in a shuddering heap as close to the barricade as they could get.

"Steady, steady, lads!" called Mr. Judson cheerily. "That racket won't hurt nobody. It's only Indian bluff."

"Aim at their hosses!" Jud Jimpson cried. "Aim at their hosses! An' don't shoot 'til I give th' word."

On, on came the Indians, their wild horses running at full speed, their blankets and plumes fluttering in the wind, their decorations glittering in the sun, their weapons whirling threateningly around their heads, their voices yelling that most dreadful of all sounds—the Indian war-whoop; on they came, headed straight for the waggons, as if they would plunge headlong over them, a solid mass of yelling savages and plunging horses.

"Why, oh, why don't Jud tell us to shoot?" and Arthur glanced anxiously to where Ray was kneeling at his end of the waggon, his rifle to his shoulder, his white cheek pressed tightly against its butt, his eye glancing along the levelled barrel, his finger on the trigger, all the trembling gone from his frame, all the

fear from his heart, ready to fire on the instant of the command.

"He's waiting for the right moment," Ray replied without lifting his cheek from the rifle butt or taking his eye from the sights. "I'll take that big black horse, Art. You aim at that white-faced bay."

"Git ready," shouted Jud Jimpson from his waggon. "They're goin' tew break!"

As he spoke the solid mass of Indians, now about forty rods away, suddenly divided, turning to the right and left to circle around the waggons, while at the same moment, every yelling warrior vanished, as if struck off his horse's back by the hand of magic.

Ray and Arthur stared at the circling horses in astonishment, but the next moment the mystery stood revealed when, from under the horses' necks, white puffs of smoke shot forth, and the crack-crack of rifles were heard, and a bullet or two tore through the canvas of the waggon-cover above their heads. These splendid horsemen, at the instant of their turning, had dropped to the off sides of their horses and clung there, making a moving breastwork of the bodies of their trained war-ponies.

"Now—steady—aim at th' hosses!" Jud Jimpson called. "Ready—FIRE!" and the flame leaped from his rifle barrel and the rifle barrels of the others.

Down went two of the horses, as if they had been suddenly struck on the heads with axes, throwing their riders headlong to the ground, and the black horse and the bay horse plunged wildly.

"We hit! We both hit!" shouted Arthur, excitedly beginning to reload his rifle.

"Oh, if my gun was only loaded now!" exclaimed

Ray, as the two Indians who had been thrown from their horses' backs jumped to their feet and started toward their mounted companions, two of whom had turned and were now galloping toward them.

But the rifle that Jud Jimpson had picked up along the trail had enabled him to prepare for just such an emergency, and almost at the moment one of the mounted Indians reached the side of the foremost of the running warriors, evidently a chief by his head-dress, the extra rifle cracked, and the chief bounded up into the air like a struck deer, and fell to the ground all doubled up and lay still.

It was a splendid shot, and Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins cheered, heartily seconded by Ray and Arthur, but Jud Jimpson was too busy reloading his rifles to cheer.

Then they saw the mounted Indian do a deed of rare bravery. He quickly dismounted, within range of that deadly rifle, lifted the body of his chief in his arms, placed it across the back of his horse, and, mounting, rode off shouting his cries of defiance.

In the meantime the other dismounted Indian had sprung to the back of a horse behind a companion, and all had galloped swiftly out of range of the white man's deadly rifle, leaving behind two dead horses, and bearing away with them the dead body of their chief and two badly wounded ponies.

"Don't think they'll want another dose of that kind of medicine right soon ag'in," Jud Jimpson observed as he shoved a bullet down the long barrel of his rifle. "Injuns is mighty careful 'bout gettin' in th' way of flyin' hunks of lead," and he chuckled. "Them—hi-ho! What new devilment is tew happen now?" and he

looked anxiously toward the Indians, who by this time had reached the top of the ridge whence they had made their mad charge, and, as he spoke, had uttered a wild yell of exultation and defiance and had dashed down the other side of the ridge and vanished.

"Hurrah! There they go!" shouted Arthur triumphantly, jumping to his feet and swinging his hat around his head. "The cowards! Not even to give a fellow a chance for a second shot at them!"

"Jest hold your hosses, hold your hosses, bub," and Jud Jimpson turned a pair of anxious eyes on Arthur. "I reckon you'll git more'n a second shot. That wa'n't no gitaway yell. That yell meant triumph an' revenge, not defeat."

"What do you make out of it, Jud?" Mr. Judson asked, coming over and standing by the side of Jud Jimpson.

"More Injuns," Jud answered briefly, his eyes glancing anxiously around the half-circle made by the waggons. "An' there's nothin' tew pertect us on that side," and he pointed to the unprotected half of the circle.

"Everybody turn out to help throw up a breastwork!" shouted Mr. Judson, seeing at once the urgent need of protecting the part of the circle where there were no waggons if they were to be attacked by a larger force of Indians.

There was no need of repeating the command. Everybody large enough to hold a shovel or spade, even the two women and Mildred and Sally Jimpson, seized one or the other of these implements and began frantically throwing up an embankment between the two ends of the half-circle made by the waggons.

Fortunately, the soil was a loose sand into which the shovel or spade cut easily, and so swiftly did the nine pairs of arms work that in the half-hour given them before the Indians reappeared, they had thrown up a breastwork nearly five feet high and thick enough to stop a rifle ball or an arrow, across the unprotected half of the circle.

First a couple of Indians, evidently scouts, appeared on the top of the ridge, who, seeing that the emigrants were still at a safe distance, turned and signalled to those behind them, and almost the next moment, so it seemed to the startled eyes of Ray and Arthur, the top of the ridge swarmed with Indian warriors mounted on their war-ponies.

The three men dropped their shovels, caught up their rifles, and with whitening faces watched the gathering of their savage enemies on the ridge-top.

"There must be at least two hundred of them! Two hundred against five, and two of them boys!" and Mr. Judson's anxious eyes searched the surrounding plain in the desperate hope of seeing some succour, but as far as the eye could reach there was not a friendly being in sight, only the bare level of the sandy plain and the ridge swarming with Indians, maddened by the death of one of their favourite chiefs. "My God! why did I ever bring Cat and Dimples into such perils?" and he turned his anguished eyes to where Mildred stood clinging to her mother, her eyes, big and round with terror, fixed on the Indians, and the roses gone from her cheeks. "But," and his strong jaws came together tightly, "them Indians haven't got us yet. Come, Cat," and quickly stepping to the side of his wife, he put his arms around the two, "brace up.

'Tain't half as hopeless as it looks. That bunch of Indians is mostly noise and feathers. Just wait and see us puncture their noise-bags and send their feathers flying. Now, get over to your barricade, and keep down close to the ground," and stooping quickly he kissed his wife, and catching Mildred up in his arms he carried her to the barricade, holding her close, and there were tears in his eyes, even while his lips smiled, as he placed her on the ground.

"Papa! Papa!" and Mildred's arms clung tightly around his neck. "Papa, you won't let the Indians get Mildred, will you?"

"Well, I reckon not," Mr. Judson answered cheerily. "Now, be my own brave little girl, and keep close to your mother, and when the noise begins, just fancy it's a Fourth of July celebration— Quick! Kiss me. Papa must go now," and snatching a kiss from Mildred's trembling lips, he hurried to his place behind the waggon, where Tom Rawlins was already crouching, for at that moment the dread war-whoop of the Indians fell on his ears and told him that the fight for life had begun.

The savages had halted for a few minutes on the ridge-top, to gather themselves for the charge, but now down they rushed toward the waggons, shouting their war-cries and flourishing their weapons, two hundred yelling fiends on horseback.

"Hold your fire 'til I tell you tew shoot," again cautioned Jud Jimpson. "Take sure aim! Make every shot tell! Aim at th' hosses!"

On came the Indians, but this time they divided before they came within rifle range, and swept in great circles to right and left of the waggons, each warrior

running his horse separately, and the more venturesome among them gradually drawing nearer and nearer to the waggons as they raced round and round the little encampment of whites. Closer and closer drew this dreadful circle, clearer and louder sounded the war-cries, plainer and more fearful became the wild, painted visages. Still Jud Jimpson withheld his word to fire.

Now the inner circle of Indians were out of their saddles, clinging to the sides of their horses and shooting from under their necks, and always slowly coming nearer and nearer. The poorly-aimed bullets whistled through the air and tore through the waggon-covers and boxes, and two of the frightened oxen were hit, adding their bellows and struggles to the turmoil and excitement.

"Steady now, steady," called Jud Jimpson, his cheek against the butt of his rifle. "Aim jest a leetle ahead of th' hosses' shoulders. Careful! Don't waste a shot! Take the hoss straight in front of you. Ready—aim —fire!"

The five rifles spoke almost at the same instant, and so well were they aimed that four of the ponies tumbled to the ground, throwing their riders over their heads.

Instantly the dismounted Indians jumped to their feet, and ran to leap on the back of a horse behind a companion, but before they could do this, Jud Jimpson's extra rifle flamed and the two heavy revolvers of Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins cracked, and one of the Indians stumbled headlong to the ground, while two others fell, but instantly jumped to their feet again, and a moment later were picked up by companions and borne beyond rifle range.

Ray and Arthur opened their mouths to cheer, but

that cheer was never uttered, for at that moment Jud Jimpson sprang to his feet, and shouting, "God in heaven, they're goin' tew charge th' breastwork!" leaped to the earthwork they had thrown up across the opening between the two outer waggons, pulling his revolvers from his belt as he did so.

Almost at the same instant Tom Rawlins and Mr. Judson were by his side, and a moment later Ray and Arthur, their revolvers in their hands, were glaring over the top of the breastwork into the faces of the on-rushing Indians, who were doing an almost unprecedented thing in Indian warfare in thus boldly charging a partially fortified camp.

"Shoot! Shoot!" shouted Jud Jimpson. "Shoot! We've got tew stop 'em, we've got tew stop 'em before they git tew th' breastwork!" and he began blazing away with a revolver in each hand.

Each of the men had two heavy Colt's revolvers, and Ray and Arthur both carried smaller but almost equally effective weapons at short range; and in a moment all these ten guns were pouring leaden bullets into the charging Indians as fast as thumbs and fingers could lift hammers and press triggers.

But straight on came the Indians, led by a gigantic chief on a huge black horse. Four or five horses went down, two or three Indians reeled in their saddles, but the black horse and the huge chief came on, his painted face working like the face of a furious fiend, and close behind him pressed a hundred yelling savages. They struck the barrier and swept over it, as a raging flood sweeps over a petty embankment.

Ray and Arthur could never remember distinctly what happened during the next few minutes. As in a

horribly vivid nightmare they saw the black horse and the huge chief plunge over the sand breastwork; saw the air behind them filled with the foam-flecked heads of rushing horses, flashing weapons, and demoniacal faces; saw Jud Jimpson go down before a blow of the giant chief; saw Tom Rawlins, with a mighty sweep of his clubbed rifle, clear a space around him and leap upon the huge savage; and then the air in front of them was filled with flashing knives and tomahawks, and clutching hands and bare muscular arms, and blinding lights—and they saw and felt no more for many minutes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

RED ELK

WHEN Ray and Arthur came back to consciousness the fight was over. Both lay on the ground side by side, their hands and feet bound together with buckskin thongs and their heads feeling as if they had been hit with sledge-hammers, but otherwise they appeared to be unhurt. All around them were Indians, moving swiftly. They struggled up into a sitting position and stared wildly around.

"Hello! Woke up, have you?" called a cheery voice behind them.

The boys turned their heads quickly and saw Tom Rawlins sitting on the ground not four feet behind them, his arms and legs tightly bound with ropes, and the clothing nearly torn off his great body, but apparently unhurt except for a number of flesh wounds.

"Mr. Judson—Mildred—" and Ray's voice shook so that he could not finish the question.

"Not a man dead or missing, except Scoot," promptly responded Tom Rawlins. "The Lord only knows where that little black nigger has gone, unless he was that scart that he shook himself to pieces and vanished in the sand," and Tom Rawlins laughed. "Everybody

else is all right, barring a few knocks and cuts. The women folks and the kids are over yonder by that waggon," and he nodded in the direction of one of the waggons. " And Jed and Jud are behind that bunch of Indians standing in front of you. Now, boys," and his eyes rested soberly on the white faces of Ray and Arthur, " don't lose your nerve. Never say die till you're dead, that's my motto, and a mighty good motto I have found it. We'll get out of this yet. Mark my words, we'll get out of this yet," he repeated confidently and cheerfully, and his voice and words were like a tonic to the drooping spirits of the boys.

Near the barricaded waggon stood the huge Indian chief, who had led the charge, and around him were gathered half a dozen of his bravest warriors, listening to his rapidly spoken words. The big Indian had not come out of the fight unscathed, for blood was trickling down his neck from a scalp wound, one of his cheeks was bruised and swollen, and his right breast was red from a flesh wound in his shoulder, but he had received no serious hurt.

Evidently the chief was excited, for as he spoke he gesticulated violently and pointed eastward, and appeared to be urging haste of some kind.

Suddenly, in the midst of his harangue, he stepped backward, close to the barricade of goods piled up under the waggon, and the next instant, with a yell that could have been heard a mile, he leaped straight up into the air, with something black and squirming clinging to and clawing at one of his bare legs. The brave warriors around him tumbled over themselves in their fear and haste to get out of the reach of that dread black thing that had sprung upon their chief

from the very ground at his feet. The chief kicked and yelled, and then reaching down, seized the black thing with both of his great hands, pulled it loose from his leg, and held it up, kicking and squirming, in front of his astonished face.

"Scoot! Scoot! It's Scoot!" yelled Arthur. "It's Scoot, as sure as I am alive!" and he stared in open-eyed wonder at the little negro boy, held dangling in the air by the big chief, whose astounded eyes had never before seen a black pickaninny.

Scoot's eyes were rolling like white marbles in his head, his India-rubber mouth was twisting and jerking all over the lower part of his face, and his legs were going like the fans of a windmill in a hurricane, while the big Indian stood staring blankly at him, trying to make out what sort of a thing he held in his hands. Suddenly one of the whirling feet struck the chief a hard thump on the end of the nose.

"Ugh! Heap bad black medicine!" and the chief dropped Scoot, jumped back from him, and rubbing his nose, commanded one of his warriors to catch and bind the white man's "black medicine toad."

In order to do this with the least possible trouble and to assure himself that the black thing was mortal, the warrior swung back his tomahawk and was about to hurl it at the negro boy, when Scoot bounded to his feet, gave one frightened glance at the circle of dusky warriors that hemmed him in, and began jumping up and down in a wild ecstasy of fear.

The tomahawk was stayed, and the circle of Indians looked in wonder and not a little superstitious dread at the little black jumping figure of the boy.

"Jig it! Give them a jig!" shouted Tom Rawlins.

"They'll think you're making heap big medicine, and won't dare touch a kink of your woolly head!"

And Scoot did give them a jig! And such a jig as he had never danced before, and probably would never dance again, for fear lent nimbleness to his legs, and as he danced he piped a shrill weird accompaniment to the beatings of his feet.

Not a hand was raised to stop him nor to harm him, and he danced until, catching sight of Ray and Arthur, he gave a wild yell of joy, and darting to them, crouched between the two boys.

For a moment the Indians stood spellbound, then the big chief spoke sharply and the spell was broken, but thereafter the little black body of Scoot was sacred. Not an Indian would touch him, though he was watched closely.

Again the big chief harangued his warriors, again emphasising his words by frequently pointing to the east, but he spoke only for a few minutes, when he appeared to gain his point, for with loud yells and cries all but about twenty-five of the warriors sprang on the backs of their ponies and galloped swiftly away toward the west, evidently in pursuit of another party of emigrants.

The big chief at once turned and strode to where Tom Rawlins sat.

"White Bull," he said, "Red Elk great chief," and he thumped one of his breasts with his huge fist. "He no fraid white man's guns. Like hurricane he strike his enemies—smash! Warriors," and he made a sweeping gesture toward the departing Indians, "say kill and go before white soldiers come. Red Elk say, no, take white prisoners and waggons to mountains quick, where kill

slow, like great warriors. Warriors go to get more white prisoners. Red Elk stay to take prisoners to mountains. Red Elk heap great chief. He no ox-driver. Red Elk make hands and feet free, white men drive oxen, oxen draw tent-waggons. No try to escape, no hurt. Try run, kill. What say White Bull?"

"Good," Tom Rawlins answered promptly, rejoiced to find that there was to be no immediate killing and that the galling bonds were to be taken from his hands and feet. "White man willing. Free our hands and legs and we'll have the oxen yoked to the waggons in a jiffy, and drive them anywhere you want us to—and take it all out on your ugly old mug at the very first opportunity," he added under his breath.

"How?" and Red Elk glared at him suspiciously.

"Bully—good—all right," and Tom Rawlins nodded his head toward the oxen and then toward the waggons and smiled.

The chief turned to his warriors and gave a number of sharp commands, and for the next few minutes there were busy times for Indians and white men.

The hands and feet of Mr. Judson, Tom Rawlins, Jud Jimpson, and the two boys were freed; long ropes were tied around the waist of each and held by an Indian, tethering him to a warrior like an ox to a stake; and they were bade to yoke the oxen to the waggons, and gently urged to make haste with the sharp points of knives and spears. The women folks, and Mildred and the Jimpson children, and Scoot, were all piled in one of the waggons; the wounded Indians and the dead—there were five badly wounded and two dead Indians—were placed in the other two waggons; the goods that had been used for the barricade were

hastily thrown back into a waggon; and in ten minutes, so quickly did every one work under the watchful eyes of the terrible Red Elk, the waggons were again moving over the sandy plain.

Ray and Arthur were forced to trot along by the sides of their mounted captors, the ropes still fastened to their waists, while Red Elk himself rode Getthere, and other warriors sat astride of Black Duke and Beauty and the other horses. The three men were compelled to drive the oxen and to urge them to their utmost speed. Red Elk led the way, and as he rode he was ever casting apprehensive glances eastward over his shoulder. Evidently his fear of the coming of the white soldiers was great.

They turned directly from the trail and struck across the plains to the south and west, toward a break in a low mountain-like range of bluffs, and after a couple of hours of the hardest kind of travelling for man and beast, they reached the bluffs and entered a water-worn chasm that once had been the bed of a mighty river. For four hours longer the weary men and boys and oxen were forced, with relentless cruelty, through winding chasms and canyons, and up and down steep banks, and across streams of water, until they had lost all sense of direction and were ready to fall to the ground with fatigue, and then they came suddenly to a beautiful grass-covered and flower-decked valley, not more than a mile wide by two miles long, and shut in on all sides, save where they had entered, by high hills. Through the centre of this delightful valley ran a clear stream of water, and along its banks grew little groves of great trees. In one of these groves Red Elk halted, and signified that the camp would be made there.

Ray and Arthur and the three men, although so wearied by the severity of their forced march that they could hardly stand on their feet, were compelled to do all the work of pitching the camp and caring for the animals. They were not allowed to speak to one another, nor to the women and the children. A single word would bring a blow or the jab of a knife point, and they soon learned to do what they were told in silence, but they did some hard and vengeful thinking. When the work was done they were taken to the foot of a huge tree that grew near the centre of the little opening where they had made their camp and about a rod from the camp-fire, and there their hands and feet were securely bound again, and they were thrown on the ground as if they were bags of oats, and a warrior was stationed near to keep an eye on them.

Red Elk now strode to where Mrs. Judson and Mildred and Mrs. Jimpson, her baby in her arms and her other children huddled around her, sat, closely watched, under another large tree on the opposite side of the camp-fire from where the men lay bound.

"Red Elk hungry," he said. "White squaws cook heap good white man's eat," and he pointed toward the fire.

Mrs. Judson understood at once what the chief meant and arose to obey, but Mrs. Jimpson did not comprehend his meaning so quickly, besides she had her baby in her arms, and sat staring blankly up into the brutal face of the chief, hugging the baby closer to her bosom.

"Ugh! White papoose no good!" and reaching down Red Elk caught one of the little rounded arms in his huge hand, jerked the baby violently from the

mother's bosom, and threw the helpless little thing on the ground. "Now, go cook," he commanded.

In an instant Mrs. Jimpson's face grew white and tense and hard as marble, and her eyes blazed, and, springing to her feet, she leaped straight at the face of Red Elk, clawing with her bent fingers like a cat. Her nails were sharp, and before the big chief had recovered sufficiently from his astonishment at this undreamt-of onslaught by the despised "white squaw" to defend himself, they had ploughed half a dozen red furrows down his swarthy cheeks, and Mrs. Jimpson, with a cry from her mother-heart, had sprung from him and caught her baby up again in her arms, and stood before the chief, white and panting, but ready to defend her baby with her last drop of blood.

For a brief moment Red Elk stood glowering furiously at the brave little woman, then with a guttural howl of pain and wrath, his hand went swiftly to his tomahawk.

Mildred and her mother screamed, Jud Jimpson struggled like a madman to burst his bonds, Mr. Judson's and Tom Rawlins's faces went white as milk, and Ray and Arthur both shrank and shivered as if the horror of that dread axe was about to fall on their own heads.

Red Elk swung back his arm, his eyes on the woman's face, the tomahawk gleaming in his hand, and then with a malignant grin he lowered his weapon and spoke a few words to a couple of warriors standing a short distance behind Mrs. Jimpson. He had suddenly thought of a weapon more cruel than his tomahawk.

The two warriors sprang upon Mrs. Jimpson from behind, threw her violently to the ground, wrenched

the baby from her arms, and despite her struggles and screams, quickly tied her hand and foot.

Red Elk stooped and picked up the screaming baby from the ground, where she had fallen, by one of her arms, and held her gloatingly above the helpless mother.

"White squaw wildcat, with nails like knives," he said, wiping the blood from his face with his free hand. "Red Elk no kill white squaw. White squaw make heap good slave. White papoose no good. Red Elk kill squalling white papoose," and still holding the baby over the frantic mother, he swung his tomahawk again above his head, and paused for a moment to gloat over the anguish of the mother.

As he thus stood, the screaming baby held outstretched in his left hand above the shrieking mother, the tomahawk gleaming aloft in his right, the look of a malignant fiend on his ugly face, what pen could picture the anguish of the helpless father and husband or the horror of his wretched friends?

"Red Elk no like squalling papoose," and the fiend grinned. "Red Elk stop squall," and the muscles on the right arm stiffened for the fatal blow; but, before the tomahawk could fall, the sharp crack of a rifle came from a thicket not ten rods away, instantly followed by a volley of shots.

The shattered tomahawk fell from the startled chief's hand, a dozen of his bravest warriors reeled and stumbled and plunged dead and dying to the ground, slain by that fatal first volley, and before the remaining braves could recover sufficiently from the shock of their rudely awakened dream of security to seize their discarded weapons, the dreaded war-whoop

of their mortal enemies, the Delawares, rang in their ears, and the space between the thicket and the camp was alive with swiftly running Delaware warriors.

At their head bounded their chief, a tall, graceful young warrior, lithe and powerful as a panther, a long knife gleaming in his right hand, his eyes fixed on the giant form of Red Elk, who with knife and tomahawk, his only weapons, in his hands, had whirled around and stood—a lion at bay.

The eyes of Red Elk lighted venomously when they caught sight of the young chief.

"Go to the Happy Hunting Grounds to await with your father the coming of Red Elk," he cried, and hurled his tomahawk, but with a movement swift as a swallow's wing the advancing chief avoided the deadly weapon and sprang in front of Red Elk.

"The Great Spirit has answered my prayer," he cried, pausing and crouching like a panther about to spring. "He has brought me face to face with the slayer of my father. Go to him and tell him his son has sent him a slave to wait on him when he is weary with the chase," and with the sudden swiftness of the leap of an arrow from the bow, he sprang at Red Elk, his keen knife glinting in his right hand.

Red Elk was a famous warrior whose skill and courage had been tested on many a hard-fought field, where his great strength and size had given him a tremendous advantage in all physical encounters, and now he met the onset of the young chief as a furious old lion would meet the leap of a bold panther, grimly confident in his superior strength and prowess.

But whatever the young chief lacked in sheer muscular strength he more than made up in suppleness and

agility. Wisely avoiding the grip of those great arms, he darted hither and thither around his big antagonist, now springing in to strike with the keen knife, now leaping back to avoid the return blow, never for an instant taking his eyes from the red brutal face, never for an instant pausing to rest, tireless and sudden as if his sinews were made out of steel springs.

Around the two struggling men gathered a few of the Delaware warriors, but they did not offer to aid their young chief, and stood silent, their black eyes watching every movement of the two chiefs with the keenest interest.

Suddenly the watchful eyes of the young Delaware saw his opportunity, and with a movement so swift that the eyes could not follow it, he leaped under the upraised arm, struck two swift, terrible blows with his knife, and bounded back.

The knife and tomahawk dropped from Red Elk's hands, his body straightened stiffly, and with the death-whoop ringing from his lips, he plunged face downward on the ground. The knife of the young Delaware had pierced his heart.

The battle was over. It had been a glorious victory for the Delawares. They had lost only two warriors, while the dead of the Blackfeet covered the ground.

During these exciting moments our friends had been helpless but intensely interested spectators, and now, with the whoops of the victors ringing in their ears, they wondered what was to be their fate, whether their rescuers were enemies or friends. Fortunately, the agony of this suspense was of short duration, for, pausing only to assure himself that his enemy was dead, the young Delaware chief turned and came swiftly toward

the spot where the men and boys lay bound. He went straight to Ray and Arthur, and with swift strokes of his knife, cut the bonds from their limbs and helped them to their feet.

"Do not my brothers, Leaping Beaver and White Otter, know their brother, Eagle Feather?" he asked of the astounded boys in a low musical voice, all the lust of battle gone out of his pleasant face. "Eagle Feather glad——"

But he could say no more, for Ray and Arthur, with a shout, each caught hold of a hand, and with tears in their eyes and sobs in their voices, were trying to thank him for saving their lives and to tell him how it was his war-paint and his war-dress that had prevented them from recognising him.

That was a great moment for the two boys—a great moment for all our friends. In the space of a few minutes they had passed from the agony of despair to the joys of a safe deliverance, and their heroic rescuer was the young Delaware chief, Eagle Feather, their friend and brother!

"I reckon you boys certainly did cast your bread upon the waters when you jumped into the Mississippi and pulled out that young Delaware Indian, and we've all got it back to-day a thousand fold," and Mr. Judson turned with tears in his eyes to Eagle Feather, who stood smiling at the crowd of white and happy faces surrounding him. "Well, I've 'most always found it pays in the long run to help anybody when you can, irrespective of race, colour, or previous conditions of servitude," and with this bit of homely but wise philosophy, Mr. Judson gripped Eagle Feather's hand and shook it with the warmth of a brother.

The young chieftain proved himself as cautious a leader as he was brave, for he at once, although it was now nearing night, ordered the oxen yoked to the waggons and everything got in readiness to immediately leave this delightful little valley, that again was looking as if it had never heard the sound of an Indian war-whoop nor witnessed the shedding of human blood. He had only twenty-five warriors with him, and evidently the larger body of Blackfeet were expected to rendezvous in this valley and might come galloping in at almost any moment.

Accordingly, the oxen were quickly yoked to the waggons, and, guarded and guided by Eagle Feather and his warriors, our friends set out to find their way back to the distant California trail.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ON THE BACKBONE OF THE CONTINENT

LITTLE damage had been done by the Indians to the outfit, and not one of our white friends had been seriously hurt, while their enemies had been most severely punished; consequently it was a very joyous and triumphant company, notwithstanding their extreme fatigue, that passed out of the little valley they had entered but a few short hours before with such gloomy apprehensions. Ray and Arthur, to their irrepressible joy, again sat on the backs of Getthere and Black Duke, but Mildred remained in the waggon with her mother, while Mr. Judson, Tom Rawlins, and Jud Jimpson wielded their ox-whips and urged the beasts over the rough road as fast as possible, for they wished to be far from the little valley before the darkness of night overtook them. Eagle Feather and his warriors led the way, and like a cautious general the chief threw out scouts in front and on the flanks, to prevent their being taken by surprise or falling into an ambuscade.

They did not camp that night until it was so dark that it was impossible to see to go farther, and then they dared build no fires for fear the Blackfeet might see them, and were compelled to eat a cold supper in the darkness. The watchful eyes of Eagle Feather and

his warriors guarded the camp, and our friends slept the sleep of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

"My, but wasn't Eagle Feather great when he was fighting with Red Elk?" were Ray's last words as he rolled himself up in his blanket and lay down by the side of Arthur.

"Ye-s. He's the brav-e-s-t man I e-v-e-r s-a-w," and both tired boys were sound asleep.

It was not until near the middle of the afternoon of the next day that our party struck the emigrant trail, where they were fortunate enough to fall in with Captain Duncan in command of a company of Mounted Rifles from Fort Laramie, who had been sent out after this same band of Blackfeet that had attacked and captured the Judson party.

Captain Duncan and his soldiers were greatly elated over the death of Red Elk, who was one of the most cruel and dreaded of the Blackfeet chiefs, and their praise of the part Eagle Feather and his warriors had played was hearty and freely expressed.

From Captain Duncan Mr. Judson learned that a large company of emigrants were encamped at Independence Rock, one of the most famous landmarks of that country, ten miles farther along the trail, and it was determined to push on and endeavour to reach their encampment that night.

Accordingly, hasty farewells were said to Captain Duncan and his men, who were anxious to be off on the trail of the main party of Blackfeet, who had attacked the emigrant company on the afternoon of the day before and had been driven off, and who were now, doubtless, making for the little valley to meet Red Elk and his prisoners; and once more the worn

waggons of our friends were creaking their weary way over the long trail to California.

Eagle Feather and his warriors rode with the Judson party to Independence Rock, where they found a company of some two hundred emigrants encamped, resting their nearly worn-out animals for a couple of days. They reached the big camp about nine o'clock at night, and were most heartily welcomed, especially after the emigrants learned of the desperate battle they had had with Red Elk and his warriors, and how they had been rescued and guarded by the heroic young Delaware chief, Eagle Feather, and his braves.

The next morning a great feast was given the Indians, at which Eagle Feather was the guest of honour, and to which every emigrant in the company gladly contributed of his best, for all felt that Indians so brave and friendly to the whites and who had shown their bravery and friendliness in such an effective manner, should not be allowed to go unrewarded, or permitted for a moment to doubt how highly such services were valued by their white brothers.

Mr. Judson urged Eagle Feather to go along with them, at least as far as the South Pass, but Eagle Feather shook his head.

"No," he said, "Eagle Feather's mission is ended. He has avenged the death of his father. He must now return to the lodges of his people, who dwell far to the south, near the beginning of the long trail. But the kindness of his white brothers is warm in his heart, in the hearts of his warriors. Eagle Feather's memory is long. He will never forget his white brothers. He will tell his people of their kindness, and their memories will be kept green in the hearts of the Delawares."

The young chief and his warriors left the encampment that day a little after noon, bearing with them many presents from their white brothers, and the best wishes of all.

"I wish all Indians were like Eagle Feather," Mildred said with a sigh, as she stood beside Ray and Arthur, watching the Delawares riding away to the southward. "Then we wouldn't have anything more to fear from them. I don't think I can ever forget that wicked Red Elk," and she shuddered at the recollection of the horrors his name recalled.

"Eagle Feather is as good as any white man that ever lived," Arthur declared stoutly. "And he saved the lives of every one of us. I wish that big brute they called Grizzly Ike, who kicked him overboard, had been with us. I fancy he would have changed his opinion some about there being no good Indians except dead Indians, especially if he had seen that fight between Eagle Feather and the giant, Red Elk. My, but isn't Eagle Feather a fighter?"

"And to think," Ray said, his face sobering, "if we had not jumped into the Mississippi and saved Eagle Feather from drowning, he wouldn't have been here to have saved us. It's wonderful how things do happen sometimes! I shall never forget Eagle Feather."

By this time the little body of Indian warriors had reached the summit of a low ridge of hills half a mile away, and here they paused for a moment to wave a last farewell to their white brothers before galloping down the opposite side.

"Good-bye, brave Eagle Feather!" Mildred cried, waving her handkerchief, the tears in her eyes, and, as if in answer to her words, they saw Eagle Feather, his

form clearly outlined as he sat on his horse on the summit of the ridge, whirl his pony about, wave his hands in an Indian farewell and benediction, and, turning, gallop over the brow of the hill and vanish from sight.

The company remained in camp at Independence Rock until the next morning, giving our young friends ample time to examine this famous landmark, concerning which they had heard so much while on the trail that the rock seemed almost like an old friend; and a very curious and interesting formation they found the huge, rounded mass of granite that rose something over a hundred feet above the surrounding country and covered more than an acre of ground. The rock stood alone, like some giant sentinel sent out from the nearby mountains to guard their approaches. The smooth surface of the rock, to a height of ten or more feet, was covered with the names of emigrants and others who had journeyed over the trail, put on with paint or tar or cut in the rock itself.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred were greatly interested in deciphering these names, and were delighted whenever they found the name of some emigrant they had known, and of course the boys had to get a hammer and chisel and cut their own names and that of Mildred deep in the hard rock.

"Oh, see here!" and Mildred, who had wandered a little distance away while the boys were doing the chiselling, pointed to the rock in front of her. "Somebody has cut a cross deep in the rock and covered it over with black paint."

"The very thing that I've been looking all over for!" exclaimed a young man, one of another party

of emigrants who were examining the rock, hurrying up to where Mildred stood, a book in his hand. "That cross," and the young man with the book turned to the little group that had quickly surrounded him, "was cut in the rock by that intrepid explorer, John C. Fremont, seven years ago, when he passed this rock on his first exploring expedition across the Rocky Mountains. If you wish, I will read from his journal what he writes about carving the cross on this rock," and the young man opened his book.

"Was that our great Western explorer, Colonel Fremont, that we've all heard and read so much about?" Arthur, who had hurried up with Ray, asked eagerly. "The one who had Kit Carson for his guide?"

"The very same," avouched the young man. "Now, listen, this is what he writes about this very cross," and lifting the book he read:

"Yesterday evening we reached our encampment at Rock Independence, where I took some astronomical observations. Here, not unmindful of the custom of early travellers and explorers in our country, I engraved on that rock of the Far West a symbol of the Christian faith. Among the thickly inscribed names, I made on the hard granite the impression of a large cross, which I covered with a black preparation of India-rubber, well calculated to resist the influence of wind and rain. It stands amidst the names of many who have long since found their way to the grave, and for whom the huge rock is a giant tombstone."

"And," continued the young man, closing his book, "by an odd coincidence, this day happens to be the very day of the month, August 23d, on which this

cross was cut in this rock by Colonel Fremont, just seven years ago."

"Hurrah for Colonel Fremont, the man who helped to win California and its gold mines for us, and made this journey possible!" shouted a tall emigrant who had come up in time to listen to the reading from the book, and who was evidently an enthusiastic admirer of Colonel Fremont. "Three cheers for the great explorer!" and he pulled off his hat and waved it around his head and shouted his cheers lustily, joined by all who were within hearing of his voice.

Early the next morning the company broke camp at Independence Rock.

There were now over two hundred emigrants—men, women, and children—in the company, fifty-three waggons (Ray and Arthur both counted them) of various sizes and shapes, and something like four hundred head of oxen, mules, horses, and cows. All these made an extremely odd and interesting procession as they slowly wound their way, one waggon behind another, and drawn sometimes by four or five yokes of oxen or mule teams, along that lonely trail through the wilderness of plains and mountains.

"I declare," Mildred exclaimed, as she sat on Beauty a little to one side of the trail, her eyes on the long train of waggons and animals and men, nearly a mile in length, moving slowly across the level floor of the desolate plain, "if it doesn't make me think of a circus parade, only there are no elephants and no bands playing and no people looking."

"Looks more to me like a monster white worm crawling over the plain," Ray laughed. "But just see there!" and he pointed toward the end of the train.

"If there aren't our old friends, The Mourners, coffin and all, and looking solemner and thinner than ever."

"Well, I'm glad they haven't had to use their coffin yet," Mildred said. "But I am sorry they happen to be in this company with us. I wish somebody would paint that old coffin off their waggon cover. Makes me shiver just to look at it."

"Come, trot along, children," called a rough but not unkindly voice. "You know the orders are that every one must keep with his own squad while on the march, and you are already behind yours."

"All right," Ray answered. "We are new to the company, and didn't know there was such a rule, but we'll take your word for it," and he struck Getthere a light blow with his whip, and, followed by Arthur and Mildred, galloped up to where the three waggons of the Judson party had their place in the long line.

This large company, as was necessary where so many emigrants joined together, was under strict military discipline, and had been officered and organised before the Judson party joined them, consequently all they had to do was to fall in line and obey orders. A retired army officer, Charles Goodwin, had been elected captain, and under him were four lieutenants, each in command of fifty emigrants, and these fifties were again subdivided into squads of ten each, with a corporal in command, who was held responsible by his lieutenant for the good behaviour and order of his squad. The Judson party, coming in after the organisation had been perfected, was formed into a separate squad. Mr. Judson was appointed corporal of the squad, and the three waggons were given a place near the centre of

the waggon-train. Scouts always rode a quarter of a mile or more in advance of the waggons to avoid any danger of their running into an Indian ambush. When night came the waggons were drawn up in a circle, corralled, as it was called, and chained together, leaving but one small opening through which all the animals were driven after they had had their feed of grass, and closely guarded during the darkness of the night. This precaution rendered the Indian's favourite mode of horse and cattle stealing—stampeding—impossible, and made a strong breastwork behind which to fight if the emigrants were attacked. The camp-fires were built just outside the circle of waggons, and the entire encampment was surrounded by a line of pickets.

This will give you a very good idea of the methods employed by the large waggon-trains to protect themselves from the Indians while crossing the plains, and will show you how difficult it would be for even a large body of Indians, trained and armed as the American savages of those days were, to work serious harm to so large and carefully guarded a company of emigrants as the one of which our friends now found themselves a part.

"Isn't it about time we came to the Devil's Gate?" Arthur asked, as the children pulled up their ponies by the side of Jud Jimpson, who was striding contentedly along by the side of his oxen. "You know you said it was only about five miles from Independence Rock, and it seems to me as if we had gone twice that distance already, and I'm afraid we will all melt and run away if we don't strike it soon," and he wiped the streaming perspiration from his hot face.

"Well, you'll have tew do your meltin' some lively

if you git it all done afore we git tew th' Devil's Gate," Jud laughed, " for that cleft in them hills over yonder is his infernal majesty's gateway. Though why it's called th' Devil's Gate is more'n I know, seein' it's th' coolest spot in all this sun-baked country. I reckon you're not th' only one that is a-longin' for a whiff of its cool air. 'Twill be like goin' down intew a great, cool cellar. An' it's grander than any picter you ever seed. God was thinkin' big thoughts when He made that river flow through them hills. There goes th' head-waggin now!" and Jud pointed with his ox-whip to where the first of the long train of waggons had made a turn to the right and was just disappearing around a pile of rocks.

A quarter of an hour later their own waggons made the turn, and before their eyes was the Devil's Gate.

" Oh!" and Mildred drew in a long breath and a look of awe came into her face. " It looks just as if some great giant had taken a huge axe and chopped a chunk right out of the hard rocks of the hill to make a place for the river to run through. And how the water foams and races over the rocks! It is grand!"

And, indeed, it was a grand sight that Mildred and our friends were looking upon. Through a narrow gorge cut, as if with a great axe, as Mildred had said, through the solid rock of the hill to a depth of from three to four hundred feet, brawled the waters of the Sweetwater River, flecked with foam and throwing its spray high in the air as it rushed tumultuously over the rocks that obstructed its free passage. On either side the high walls of rock rose almost perpendicularly to a height in places of over four hundred feet, effectually shutting out the direct rays and heat of the sun,

and making a delightfully cool and refreshing retreat from the scorching heat of the dry, dusty plains.

The gorge was some two hundred yards in length, and the long train of waggons passed very slowly through it, so that man and beast might enjoy as much as possible of its refreshing coolness.

When the novelty of travelling with so large a company of emigrants began to wear off, as it did after the first few days of following the trail, as it wound its way up the picturesque valley of the Sweetwater after leaving the Devil's Gate, Ray and Arthur and Mildred began to weary of the restraints of the discipline to which all the members of the company were subjected, and to long for the freedom that had been theirs while they were travelling by themselves. The three men were not troubled in the least by the strictness of the discipline, but another matter gave them even more serious concern, and that was the slow rate at which this large company was compelled to move. A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and a waggon-train can be no speedier than its slowest team, and among so many there were a few whose oxen or horses were so nearly worn-out that the whole waggon-train was delayed in order that they might keep with the company. Then the oxen of the Judson party, owing to the care with which they had been handled and the wisdom our friends had showed in not overloading their waggons or overworking their animals at the start, were still in splendid condition and capable of easily making five or ten miles more a day than the company could make when doing its best, and it was getting late in the season, and it was of the utmost importance that they should cross the dreaded Sierra

Nevada Mountains before the snows of winter began to fall. Consequently the three men were even more dissatisfied with the company method of travelling than were the three children, and it was determined to push on ahead for themselves as soon as South Pass was reached, when all immediate danger from the Indians would be past.

They were now in the land of the mountains, journeying constantly upward toward the summit of the Great Divide that separates the waters of the rivers flowing into the Atlantic from the waters of the rivers flowing into the Pacific Ocean. They were nearing the backbone of the American continent. The scenery was always picturesque, and sometimes grand beyond the description of words. In whatever direction they looked the high peaks of lofty mountains shot up above the distant horizon, some of them capped with the snows of eternal winter. They were also in the land of many natural wonders. In some places warm springs of water bubbled up from the ground, in others the water was ice-cold. Soda springs were frequent, and sometimes the very ground itself was covered with a crust of the white carbonate of soda, and the banks of the rivers were white with it. Many of the emigrants used this natural saleratus in mixing their bread, even preferring it to that bought at the store, but Mrs. Judson, after her first trial, would have no more to do with it, declaring that it gave the bread a bitter taste. At one place they came to what appeared from a distance to be a small lake or pond, frozen over and covered with a light fall of drifted snow. Mildred's were the first eyes of our party to catch sight of this wonder, for the day was very warm.

"Look! Look there!" she cried in astonishment, pointing to the apparently frozen pond. "There's a lake, and it's frozen and covered with snow, with the sun pouring down on it hot enough to melt lead!"

"Great Scott!" Arthur exclaimed excitedly. "Come on. Let's have a slide. Think of going sliding on the ice and snow on a hot day like this. I wonder why that ice and snow don't melt?" and he stared wonderingly at the mystifying little pond glistening in the bright sunlight.

"Dat am sartainly a mighty good sight fo' dis niggah's eyes," declared Scoot, down whose black face the perspiration was running in streams. "I reckon Gawd A'mighty done put it dar jes' fo' to gib dis niggah a coolin'-off spot. I's gwine to hab a slide on dat ice, an' a roll in dat snow, an' den I's gwine to sot dar right on top ob dat snow an' jes' freeze dis heat right out ob me," and without waiting for anybody's permission, he started for the pond, now only a few rods away, the thick soles of his shoes clattering over the rocks as he ran.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred were about to run after him, when they caught sight of Jud Jimpson's twinkling eyes, and paused to await the result of Scoot's experience.

Scoot never hesitated an instant, but with a rush he struck the pond, both sturdy feet braced for the slide—and went rolling and tumbling in a white cloud of saleratus. Spluttering and blowing saleratus out of his mouth and nose, and clawing the bitter stuff frantically from his eyes and ears, Scoot jumped to his feet, and with yells of terror raced back to the waggons, glancing with frightened eyes over his shoulder at the bewitched

pond of ice, which, after all, was only a bed of carbonate of soda left by the evaporation of water that had held it in solution.

They frequently saw large bands of Indians watching them curiously from the summits of distant hills, and now and then a few ventured to approach, but Captain Goodwin refused to allow an Indian for any purpose inside the lines, and they had no more trouble from them except that a couple of horses were stolen one night by these cunning thieves, in spite of the watchful eyes of the guards.

For many days now the trail had been gradually ascending the enormous ridge that forms the Rocky Mountains, the backbone of the continent, so gradually that the ascent had been hardly noticed, and it seemed scarcely possible to Ray and Arthur that they were actually passing over the mighty Rocky Mountains. The nights became very cold and the air very dry, and all the emigrants had a great deal of trouble with their waggons, caused by the shrinkage of the woodwork in the dry atmosphere of the high altitude through which they were now travelling, and much time was lost resetting the tires of waggon-wheels that were constantly working loose.

At last the eyes of our weary travellers were gladdened by a sight of the famous South Pass, through which they were to make the actual crossing over the mountains. When first seen, at a distance of fifty or more miles, the Pass looked like a narrow notch cut in the mountains and hardly wide enough to allow a team to pass through, but as they slowly drew nearer and nearer, the Pass gradually widened out until it opened up into a beautiful grass-covered prairie almost

as level as a floor. And here, on the very top of the continent, the long train of waggons were corralled one night, and the camp pitched for a two-days' stop, to give their tired animals a rest before beginning the descent of the Pacific slope, and to celebrate their arrival at this famous spot, that all had looked forward to as the beginning of the end of their long journey. They were now, indeed, on the last half of the trail, but, alas, the hardest half!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TOM PIKE'S POCKET-KNIFE

THE next morning the Judson party, after consultation with Captain Goodwin, determined to push on, since their oxen really needed no rest, and accordingly, about nine o'clock in the forenoon, they bade adieu to the many new friends they had made in the company, and began the long journey down the western slope of the Rockies toward the Pacific.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred had long looked forward to this crossing of the Rocky Mountains, those towering masses of great rocks, within whose unexplored depths lurked what mysteries and unknown dangers! From their earliest childhood they had heard and read tales of these mountains, of their size and grandeur, of their lofty snow-capped peaks and deep, sunless canyons, of their savage inhabitants, the treacherous Indian, the terrible grizzly, and the lithe mountain-lion; and now they were in the very midst of this marvellous region of mystery and peril, and their hearts thrilled and their eyes sparkled as they looked around and saw the rugged peaks of towering mountains, the clefts of great canyons, and the mountain streams, winding like threads of silver down the distant western slopes.

"It makes me feel solemn, as—as if I were in a great church," Mildred said, as her eyes roamed over the glorious landscape of mountains and valleys and rivers. "And I guess I am in a church—God's great church," she added reverently.

"I feel as small as a mite on the back of an elephant," Arthur declared. "I didn't know there were such big things in the world— Hello! I wonder what Jud is stopping for? See, he's beckoning to us. Come on," and striking his spurs into Black Duke's sides, he galloped to where Jud Jimpson was standing by the side of his oxen, a broad grin on his face.

"I reckon here's somethin' that'll interest you kids," he said when the children reached his side, pointing to a spring rising from a low, boggy depression near a pile of rocks. The ground immediately in front of the spring was quite flat, and the water had spread over considerable space, forming a marshy pool. From this pool flowed two small streams, one toward the east and the other toward the west.

"The water in this stream," continued Jud Jimpson, indicating the rivulet flowing eastward, "runs down th' east side of th' mountains, an' intew th' Sweetwater, an' down th' Platte, an' intew th' Missouri, an' from th' Missouri intew th' Mississippi, an' then on down th' Mississippi tew th' Gulf of Mexico an' th' Atlantic Ocean, somethin' over three thousand miles accordin' tew my reckonin'. An' this here water," and he pointed to the other stream, "goes a-creepin' down th' west side of th' mountains intew th' Green River, an' on down th' Green River intew th' Lord only knows what streams till it brings up in th' Pacific Ocean. Now," and something like awe crept into Jud Jimpson's voice,

"I count it mighty curious that both these streams feed from th' same spring, 'way up here on top of th' Rockies, yit th' waters of one goes tew th' Atlantic an' t'other tew th' Pacific Ocean, an' a hull continent atween 'em!"

"I know, I've heard of this spring!" cried Mildred, jumping off her pony, followed by Ray and Arthur. "And I'm going to get a pail and fill it with water that's started for the Pacific Ocean and pour it into the Atlantic stream, just so that I can say forever afterward that I've emptied a pailful of water from the Pacific Ocean into the Atlantic Ocean, and I don't think there are many little girls in all the world that can say that!" and her cheeks dimpled and her eyes sparkled with excitement as she ran to their waggon to get the pail and her mother, so that she might have an ever-present witness to bear testimony to the truthfulness of her remarkable statement.

"And I'm going to dump a pail of the Atlantic water into the Pacific, so there won't be any robbery," laughed Ray, also starting for the waggon to get one of the horse-pails.

In a few minutes Mildred and her mother and Ray were back to the spring with their pails, and along with them came the rest of the party, even to Mrs. Jimpson and her baby, to witness the really wonderful performance of pouring the waters of the Pacific into the Atlantic Ocean, and to see with their own eyes a spring that emptied into two oceans.

Mildred filled her pail from the water flowing to the Pacific, while Ray at the same moment dipped his pail into the water going to the Atlantic, and thus, there on the top of the Rockies, were the destinies of

two pails full of water changed from one ocean to another ocean.

"Now, I reckon, if water could talk," Mr. Judson philosophised as they stood watching the two little rivulets gurgling their ways down the mountain sides toward their widely separated destinies, "the water that was in them two pails would have great stories to tell when it gets to the ocean. It's a mighty curious spring, and a mighty curious thing that you've done, Dimples. But this won't get us to California. Let's be moving," and he hurried back to his waggon.

"Now we're on the down-grade!" shouted Arthur as he sprang to the back of Black Duke. "We're over the top of the Rockies, hurrah! I can almost smell the Pacific. We are moving with the current," and he glanced toward the little stream singing its way westward along the side of the trail. "Why, we could almost slide right into California from here!"

"Then let's slide," and Jud Jimpson cracked his long ox-whip, and the creaking waggons began their descent down the Pacific slope.

The waggons had now crept almost up to the snow line, and Ray and Arthur had frequently cast longing glances toward the cool whiteness that sometimes seemed but a few feet above them, and when, toward the middle of the afternoon they came to a place where the snow came down in the shade of a great bluff to within a few rods of the trail, the sight was too much for their boyish enthusiasm, and with a shout to Mildred and Scoot and Sally Jimpson to come up and have a snow-fight, they made a rush for the snow-bank.

Mildred and Sally followed promptly, but Scoot, mindful of his recent experience in the saleratus bed,

declined to go, declaring: "I done want nothin' mo' to do wid dis har mount'in snow. No 'spectable Kentuck niggah's gwine to touch dat dar kind ob snow mo'n once," and he sulked by the side of the waggons, rolling his eyes curiously toward the children, as if expecting the snow to be suddenly transformed into saleratus, as he fancied the snow on the pond had been.

"Great, isn't it?" cried Arthur, seizing a handful of the snow the moment he reached the bank and dashing it into Mildred's face.

"Splendid!" retorted Mildred, giving him so sudden and vigorous a push that down he went headlong in the feathery whiteness.

"Bury him! Bury him!" yelled Sally, and then both girls began piling snow upon Arthur as he struggled to his feet, so fast that in a moment he looked more like an animated snowball than he did like a human being.

Then began a wild romp up and down the snowbank, and the air was filled with flying snow and merry shouts and happy laughter.

In the midst of all this excitement Ray suddenly stopped and stared for a moment at a pile of rocks, lying half a mile or more away and considerably lower than the spot where he now stood, but within sight of the trail.

"Come here, Art, girls!" he called excitedly. "Don't that look like the body of a man lying behind those rocks, there by the side of that big middle rock?"

"It is, it surely is a man! He—he must be dead!" and Mildred's face whitened. "Come, let's hurry and tell papa," and she started on the run for the waggons, that during all this time had been moving along the trail, with Sally and the boys trailing after her.

Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins at once shouldered their rifles and started out to investigate the pile of rocks, which lay some twenty rods to one side and a little above the trail. They found no living or dead man there, but both men smelt the odour of recently smoked tobacco lingering in the air about the big rock that Ray had indicated as the place where he had seen the body, and here the sharp eyes of Jud Jimpson found a well-worn pocket-knife lying in a little crevice by the side of the rock.

"Dat am Massah Tom Pike's knife fo' sho'," Scoot declared the moment he saw the knife. "I dis'member him per'zackly, 'cose I got er lickin' fo' brakin' de small blade when I done cleaned Massah Tom Pike's boots."

"Well, I thought we'd shook them scoundrels for good!" Mr. Judson exclaimed wrathfully. "And here we find them still dodging our trail in the very heart of the Rockies," and his face clouded. "I'm in favour of stopping right here and running them down, and finding out once for all just what this continual dodging of our steps and watching behind rocks and shooting from ambush means," and Mr. Judson's lips came together tightly. "What do you say to going into camp now and trying to locate them rascals?" and he turned inquiringly to Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson.

"I say, yes," Tom Rawlins answered decisively. "We've had enough of this dodging and skulking business. This ain't no country to have a lot of cowards on your track trying to get a pot-shot at you from behind every rock."

"I'm with you," Jud Jimpson agreed. "But 'twill be some like tryin' tew find a needle in a straw-pile tew

locate them sneaks in these mountains, where even an Indian couldn't follow a trail an' an elephant could find plenty of hiding-places."

Accordingly, the camp was made on a little plot of level ground, and the three men, after cautioning Ray and Arthur to keep their rifles in their hands and their eyes wide open until their return, started out to see if they could find the camp of the Sinful Four, for they were confident that if one was near the other three would not be far away. But their search was vain. Not another trace of the men could they find before the darkness of night compelled them to return, and in the morning all agreed that it would be useless to continue the search longer, since the men had had the whole night in which to make good their escape, for it was evident they did not wish a visit from our friends, and had decamped at the first warning that they had been discovered.

The trail down the western slope of the Rocky Mountains ran through a wild and picturesque but barren region of rocks and canyons, with the white peaks of snow-capped mountains towering always above them somewhere in the distance. There was little grass and less game. Even the skill of Jud Jimpson succeeded in killing only a jack-rabbit or two and an occasional sage-hen during the entire journey from the South Pass to Fort Bridger, and our friends were compelled to return again to an almost exclusive diet of " hog-meat," as Ray disgustedly called the fried bacon and bread, with a small allowance of potatoes, and now and then a dish of beans, and one cup of good strong coffee to each meal. This was not high living, but it was a great deal better than what the majority of the emigrants

were now forced to subsist on. Nearly everybody had counted on finding plenty of game to supply them with meat, and consequently, when the game could not be found, they were forced to live on whatever they had brought with them in their waggons or packed on the backs of horses and mules, and this in many instances was little more than flour and beans.

They were now travelling through the territory of the friendly Snake Indians, where it was not necessary for the emigrants to move in large companies in order to protect themselves, and they again scattered out into a long straggling line of white-topped waggons and travel-worn men and beasts. Dead oxen and mules and horses were still frequently seen along the trail, and now and then pieces of furniture and various other things, and sometimes even an abandoned waggon, but there was no more food left by the trail side, and all the emigrants began to have a gaunt hungry look, and many of the animals were so lame they could hardly walk or so weak and worn with their long pull that they could barely drag the waggons behind them or support the packs on their backs. A few of the emigrants had even been obliged to abandon both their waggons and animals, and were bravely tramping along with their scanty supplies strapped on their backs.

The Judson party pushed on through this barren territory as speedily as possible, passing hundreds of less fortunate emigrants, many of whom were the very men who, at the beginning of the long trail, had so jauntily passed our friends and had tauntingly promised to tell the folks in California that they were coming.

"Now," Mr. Judson remarked one day to Ray and Arthur, when they had overtaken and had passed a

particularly unfortunate company that had lost nearly all their animals and had been forced to abandon their waggons and pack what little they had left on the backs of three gaunt mules, and whom the boys well remembered as having passed them when a few days out from Independence at a rattling pace, "there's a living example of the old saying, 'the more haste the less speed,' and of the wisdom of using your thinkers a little bit before starting on such a journey as this. If them fellows had used horse-sense at the start, and had not overloaded or overdriven their animals, they would have been just as far along on the trail to-day, with all their animals in good shape and fit to make the trip clear through to the gold mines. But now, I reckon, if they ever see California 'twill only be by God's mercy. Well, I suppose when a fellow insists on making his own bed it is no more than right that he should sleep in it. Them's the same fellows that Jud and I tried for more than an hour away back near Independence to convince that they'd better take it easy until their animals got broke in, and got laughed at for our pains. Well, I reckon they are not doing any laughing at us now. It don't pay to know too much about a thing you know too little about," and with this sage, if somewhat contradictory, bit of philosophy, Mr. Judson gave his attention to his oxen, while Ray and Arthur recalled humbly certain comments they had made at the beginning of the journey, and agreed with Mr. Judson that it didn't pay "to know too much about a think you know too little about."

A careful lookout was kept for signs of the Sinful Four, as Mr. Judson usually called Tom Pike and his companions, but not a thing was seen nor heard of them

until the day before they reached Fort Bridger, when a party of emigrants they passed on the trail told them that four men in a light spring waggon, drawn by a pair of big gaunt mules, had driven by some three hours earlier in the day, leading a saddle horse behind the waggon, and that the men had stopped to inquire if an outfit with a red waggon drawn by three yokes of red oxen driven by a great bull-necked man had gone by yet.

"And as that description seems to fit your party some snug," and their informant glanced toward Big Tom Rawlins and his red waggon and red oxen, "I calculates that you are the party meant, and that you will find your friends in camp restin' up a bit when you reach Fort Bridger. The big mules looked pretty nigh tuckered when they passed us."

"I hope we will," Mr. Judson said so earnestly that the man glanced quickly at him.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" he asked.

"Not to talk about," Mr. Judson answered some shortly. "But if they are the four men we think they are, we're mighty anxious to have an interview with them. Thank you kindly for your information," and the Judson party drove on.

Evidently the Sinful Four had abandoned or sold their oxen and waggon, and were now depending on the mules alone, for our friends felt sure that the men in the light spring waggon who had inquired after them were none other than Tom Pike and his trio of scoundrels.

Fort Bridger was reached a little after sundown the next day, the seventh after leaving the South Pass. The fort was situated on a large island in Black's Fork,

a tributary of the Green River, and our friends pitched their camp on the bank of this stream half a mile below the fort, too wearied after an unusually long and hard day's travel to care to visit the post that night. They intended to remain here for a couple of days to rest their animals and do some needed repairing to the waggons, and so would have ample time to visit the fort by daylight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE BATTLE WITH THE GRIZZLY

FORT BRIDGER at this date was not a United States military fort, but an Indian trading-post established by James H. Bridger, better known as Jim Bridger, one of the oldest and best-known hunters and scouts in the Rocky Mountains, and probably one of the first, if not the first, white man to sail on Great Salt Lake, who had hunted and traded all over this section of the country for the last thirty years.

Ray and Arthur and Mildred had looked forward with great interest to seeing this renowned old hunter in his mountain stronghold, and consequently they were three very much interested and curious children who accompanied Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson to the fort early the next morning.

Here, on a large island formed by the Black's Fork dividing itself at this point into three channels, the old hunter had surrounded a space of ground some two acres in extent with a strong stockade ten feet high, and had built his home and trading-post inside of this enclosure, which was entered by means of two large swinging gates made of extra heavy timbers, through which teams and cattle could be driven when there was need and held inside safe from all marauders.

A large number of emigrants were encamped on the

grass-covered plains surrounding the fort, and the eyes of Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson searched eagerly among them for a sight of the light spring waggon and the big team of mules, but they searched in vain. Not a sign of the Sinful Four was to be seen.

Jim Bridger gave them a hearty welcome at the fort. Jud Jimpson and he were old acquaintances, and had hunted and trapped together through this very region years before, and for a couple of hours or more the children sat entranced, listening while these two old hunters recalled the thrilling experiences of those bygone days.

"By th' way, Jim," Jud Jimpson asked, as they were about to start back to camp, "have you seen anything of four men travellin' with a light spring waggin an' a bouncin' big span of mules? Must have reached here yesterday or th' day afore."

"I reckon you mean them fellers camped over by the Big Buffalo Waller," Jim Bridger responded. "Got in night afore last. Mighty fine span of mules, but 'bout tuckered. Come on. We'll see if them's th' fellers you mean. Their camp's in sight from over there," and he pointed to the south side of the stockade, where a rude ladder gave access to a platform built against the sides of the pickets at such a height as to enable one standing on it to look over the top of the stockade.

Jud Jimpson, followed by Jim Bridger, quickly mounted to the platform.

"There they be," and Jim Bridger pointed to the southwest. "Down there by— Well, I'll be jiggered if they ain't gone! An' I reckoned on a-tradin' for that span of mules, th' best pair of mules I've seen for more'n a dog's age," and his face showed his surprise

and disappointment. "Friends of yourn?" and he turned inquiringly to Jud.

"Yes, th' kind you want your gun along when you call to see 'em," Jud answered, and then he narrated to the old hunter some of the experiences they had had with the Sinful Four.

"Th' cowardly sneaks!" and Jim Bridger's eyes glinted. "If they want your scalps, why don't they stand up an' fight like white men, an' not skulk along your trail like a passel of cowardly Digger Injuns? If you come up with 'em, you'd better shoot fust, an' make your inquiries after, when it can be done quiet an' peaceful like. That's th' safest way when dealin' with such vermint," and the scowl on the old Indian-fighter's face fairly made Mildred shudder.

The waggons required a little "fixing" and the horses and oxen needed reshoeing, and to accomplish this our friends found it necessary to wait at Fort Bridger, where the emigrants kept the blacksmith so busy that he usually had a couple of days' work promised ahead, until the fourth morning after their arrival, when they bade adieu to the hospitable old hunter and started for Salt Lake City, one hundred and twenty-five miles to the southwest.

The route from Fort Bridger to Salt Lake City, for the greater part of the way, ran through a wild, sandy, desolate country, cut with deep gullies and canyons and blocked by huge piles of rocks and great mountains. The water was all bad, some of it even poisonous, and little more than grease-weed and sage-brush grew from the dry, inhospitable soil. The gee-hawing, waggon-creaking stream of noisy emigrants had driven what little game there was in the region far from the trail,

and nothing eatable, except now and then a jack-rabbit, was to be seen. Sometimes the road lay through rock-strewn valleys, sometimes over dry, sandy plains, and sometimes along the precipitous side of a high mountain, where a fall meant instant death to man and beast.

Through this wilderness of barren plains and valleys and mountains our friends were anxious to make all possible speed, and when they came to a section of the road some fifty miles in length, where they were told they would find neither grass nor water of any kind that was fit to drink, they decided to travel all night, in order to get through this waterless region with as little suffering from the pangs of thirst as possible.

The night was cool, as all nights in the mountains are, and a full moon hung in the clear, star-sparkling skies, its white light seeming to give an added loneliness to the desolate trail, and filling the valleys and hollows and rocky canyons with ghostly shadows, while the silence of the night was a-tremble with half-heard mysterious sounds, and even the commonplace creakings of the waggon-wheels and the yokes of the straining oxen sounded weird and mysterious, as the heavy waggons crawled along through the moon-lit valleys or up the lonely mountain sides.

As usual, Jud Jimpson led with his waggon, with Mrs. Jimpson and the children inside. Then came Mildred and Ray and Arthur, riding on their ponies, and followed by the Judson waggon, with Mr. Judson striding along by the side of his oxen and Mrs. Judson sitting on the seat in front. Big Tom Rawlins and his red oxen drawing the red waggon, with Scoot sitting on the waggon seat and rolling his eyes about him as if he expected to see a ghost jump up and make for him

from behind every rock, came last. So far as they knew there was not another emigrant making this all-night journey.

About midnight the trail began to zig-zag up a steep mountain-side. At first the roadway was broad and safe, but the higher it went the narrower it became, until, just as they came to the highest point, where it rounded a spur of the mountain, it was not over six feet wide, with a solid wall of rock on one side and on the other a precipice so deep that, when Ray and Arthur glanced down into it, all they could see were black shadows, with here and there the top of a tall tree or the jagged point of a huge rock.

When Jud Jimpson reached this dangerous spot he stopped his oxen and bade Mrs. Jimpson and the children get out and walk behind the waggon. If anything should frighten the oxen they might go over the precipice, when they would be sure to drag the waggon with them.

" I reckon you'd better get out, too, Cat," Mr. Judson admonished. " There's no counting on dumb critters in such a scary place, and you'll be safer if you've your own legs to depend on."

" I'm going to dismount and lead Beauty," Mildred declared, glancing with a shudder over into the black depths of the abyss. " I think it will be safer for both of us."

Ray and Arthur, after another glance down into the precipice, which looked from their seats on the backs of their horses almost directly under them, concluded that Mildred's decision was a wise one, and got off the backs of Getthere and Black Duke, and gripped them firmly by the bridle-reins.

Only Scoot remained in his place in the waggon. He refused to budge, and sat tightly clinging to the seat with both hands, declaring: "Dis chile am gwine to stay right whar he can hold to somethin' solid mighty hard until we's gwan by dat black hole. I's got bones dat'll brak. I nebber done did see no sech scan'lous roads in old Kentuck," and he tightened his grip on the seat.

Jud Jimpson now started his oxen again, and slowly and cautiously moved forward toward the point where the narrow road swung around the spur, his eyes on his leaders, a small lively yoke of black steers that had begun to show signs of uneasiness. Suddenly, just as the spot where the road made the turn around the projecting crag of the mountain was reached, the black steers, with bellows of terror, whirled about like a flash and plunged, wild with fright, into the yoke behind them, and the next instant, so quickly did it all happen, the crazed and plunging oxen had stumbled over the brink of the precipice and gone down. The waggon gave a violent lurch sideways, paused for a moment on the very lip of the chasm, and with a creak that sounded like a human scream, toppled over and disappeared silently and swiftly.

For a minute all stood motionless, paralysed by this dreadful catastrophe, and then with a shriek, "My baby! Oh, my baby!" Mrs. Jimpson sprang toward the spot where the waggon had gone over, and had she not been caught in the strong arms of her husband, she might have plunged after it.

She had left the sleeping child, closely wrapped in a heavy quilt, on a pillow placed on the spring seat in front of the waggon and securely tied there with a

strong scarf, and for the moment had forgotten that the baby was still in the waggon.

"Take her and hold her tight," and Jud Jimpson passed his struggling and hysterical wife to Mr. Judson, who had hurried up. "I'm goin' after th' baby," and with a white set face he started toward the brink.

No one spoke a word. The horror was too great for words. But every eye followed the agonised face of the father as he bent over the brink and looked down into the precipice. For a moment his eyes searched the blackness below, with what agony of spirit only a father can know, and then his face suddenly lighted up, and with a shout of joy he leaped to his feet.

"A rope! Quick, a rope!" he cried, his voice tremulous with happiness. "Th' little tike is caught in th' bushes, an' only 'bout ten feet down. Bring a rope, quick, an' let me down. Shucks, Meranda, stop your goin' ons. Th' yunk's all right. Jest hear her yell."

Never did listening ears hear sweeter music than the wails now coming up from the abyss sounded in that mother's ears. She at once stopped her struggling and screaming and began to pray. Big Tom Rawlins rushed up with the rope, and in two minutes it was around Jud Jimpson's waist and he was being lowered down the precipice. A minute later came the glad cry, "Pull up! Pull up! I've got th' yunk!" and in another minute Jud Jimpson was safe and the baby was screaming in her mother's arms.

The waggon, in falling into the precipice, had turned completely over, throwing the seat, to which the baby fortunately was firmly tied, from its hold on the waggon-box into a little clump of sturdy sage-brush that grew from the side of the abyss, where the springs

caught and held, while the oxen and waggon had gone on down into the blackness below, and were never seen again by our friends.

"I wonder what scart them oxen?" Mr. Judson said, the moment he saw that the baby was safe. "Just keep your eyes on the critters, Tom. I'm going 'round that point and see if I can find out," and with his rifle held ready he started toward the spot where the frightened black steers had whirled about with such fatal results to themselves.

"Here, hold Getthere, Art. I'm going with Mr. Judson," and picking up his rifle from the ground, where he had dropped it in his excitement, Ray ran after Mr. Judson.

The road, after it rounded the point of rock, ran almost straight along the mountainside for forty or fifty rods, and the moonlight was bright enough to show this stretch of straight road quite distinctly.

"Jee-my'mee!" Ray exclaimed hoarsely, almost the moment they had rounded the point. "What is that?" and he pointed toward a huge black object that stood in the centre of the road some twenty rods away.

"Great Moses! A bear! A grizzly bear, and a whopper!" and catching hold of Ray's arm and pulling him with him, Mr. Judson hurried back and made known this startling discovery.

No hunter, no matter how brave and experienced he is, would face a ferocious grizzly bear, the most terrible animal dwelling in the western continent, on a narrow ledge of rocks unless he was obliged to do so, and the Judson party notwithstanding there were three men and two boys, all armed with good rifles and all good shots, would have gladly allowed bruin to go

his own way unharmed if that way had been any other way than the narrow road over which they must travel themselves. But now they could not turn back, and they dared not advance their oxen another step until they had disposed of the bear, and so there was nothing left for them to do but to kill the grizzly bear or drive him from the road, and the man does not live who has ever made a success of driving a grizzly.

"I want th' job of killin' that grizzly," Jud Jimpson said, his jaws coming together grimly as he glanced toward the spot where his oxen and waggon had gone down. "An' you an' Tom had better stay with your critters," he advised Mr. Judson. "We don't want no more oxen an' waggins goin' down there, an' th' rumpus might make th' cattle uneasy," and he began carefully examining his rifle.

"Let—let Art and me go with you. You know you promised us a bear hunt," and Ray's eyes sparkled and his voice trembled with excitement. "Our rifle balls might help to kill the grizzly."

"So they might. So they might," and Jud grinned at their boyish eagerness, then his face sobered. "I reckon 'twon't be a bad idea, if you can keep cool an' not stampede like them steers did. Three rifles are certainly better than one when tacklin' a grizzly, an' Jed an' Tom's got tew stay with th' cattle. So jest put some fresh primin' in your rifles an' we'll have a try for that grizzly's scalp," and he again gave his attention to his rifle.

In a few minutes the rifles were ready, and Jud Jimpson and the two boys started on their perilous venture, while Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins unhooked the oxen from the two remaining waggons to avoid the

possibility of their dragging them into the abyss, even should they become frightened and go over, and stood by their heads to keep them quiet.

"Keep 'bout two paces behind me," Jud Jimpson admonished the boys as they rounded the point of rock. "An' don't fire a shot until I do, an' then aim for th' heart an' lungs, under th' fore-shoulder where th' skin is tender. Now keep cool an' your fingers on th' triggers. There's th' grizzly!"

The bear evidently had been considerably startled by the sounds of the excitement that had been going on around the point of rock, out of his sight, and had stopped to meditate on what it all might mean before venturing to continue his journey, and when Jud and the boys came around the spur of rocks, he was still sitting in the middle of the road where Mr. Judson and Ray had seen him. Also, he was evidently in a very bad humour, for the moment he caught sight of the trio coming toward him he reared himself up on his hind legs, growling savagely and showing not a sign of giving way an inch.

"Goin' tew give us a fite, be you, you old steer-scarer? Well, we ain't steers, an' we won't scare worth a cent," muttered Jud Jimpson, as he continued to advance toward the grizzly. "Jest keep cool as ice, boys, an' shoot for th' heart," he cautioned.

The bright moonlight showed the bear distinctly, and every step Ray and Arthur took toward him he seemed to grow about a foot every way. Now they were so close that they could see his little round eyes gleaming angrily at them, and the white teeth, and the red tongue, and the long, sharp claws, and the great muscular forelegs that could fell an ox with one blow;

still Jud Jimpson continued to advance, until not more than two short rods separated him from the ugly-looking monster.

The bear stood his ground, neither advancing nor retreating, but growling horribly, while every hair on his huge body sprang up straight.

"Now," and Jud Jimpson stopped, "step up even with me," he whispered, never for an instant taking his eyes from the bear. "Throw your guns tew your shoulders an' aim for th' heart," and Jud Jimpson's long rifle came to his shoulder. "Ready?"

"Yes! Yes!" whispered back both boys, their eyes glancing along their rifle barrels to the tawny breast of the huge beast.

"Fire!"

The three rifles flashed almost simultaneously.

The bear uttered a dreadful roar and plunged straight toward them, foam and blood dropping from his jaws, and his huge body swaying from side to side and his eyes glowing like red coals.

"Back! Git back tew th' waggons!" Jud Jimpson shouted to the boys, dropping his rifle and drawing his long hunting-knife and keeping his eyes on the bear, but never making a move to get back himself.

Ray and Arthur both instinctively jumped back—what boys would not with such a monster hurling himself toward them?—but stayed themselves not ten feet from where Jud Jimpson stood, knife in hand, awaiting the grizzly, that must be stopped now and here, or what ruin might not be wrought around that jutting point of rocks?

The bear rushed straight toward Jud Jimpson and, so quickly that neither boy could ever tell just how it



The Bear Stood his Ground.

happened, the two were down on that narrow ledge, rolling at the boys' feet, the bear on top.

Ray saw the wide-opened mouth not two feet from his trembling hand, and hardly knowing what he did he grabbed his revolver from his belt, thrust the long barrel into the red mouth, and pulled the trigger.

There was a muffled report, the grizzly threw himself violently backward and sideways, his hind legs went over the edge of the precipice, and for an instant he hung, clawing desperately at the smooth, hard rock, then slid swiftly downward and disappeared.

"That was a mighty narrer squeak for me," and Jud Jimpson staggered to his feet and caught hold of Ray's hand. "I'd been a goner in 'bout tew seconds if you hadn't knowed enough to poke that pistol intew th' brute's mouth an' pull th' trigger. That was a mighty brave thing tew do, an' Jud Jimpson won't forgit it," and he almost jerked Ray's arm from his shoulder with the violent shakes he gave his hand.

"I—I was so scart that I hardly knew what I was doing," Ray answered frankly, his face white and his knees trembling so that he could barely stand.

The sounds of the fearful struggle with the grizzly had come but faintly to the anxiously listening ears around the point of rocks, and had caused the oxen and horses only a slight uneasiness which was easily quieted, and when Jud Jimpson and Ray and Arthur returned triumphant and safe, there was great rejoicing. The oxen were again quickly hooked to the waggons and the journey resumed at once, for all were anxious to get away from that fatal spot as speedily as possible.

The loss of the oxen and waggon and goods was

irreparable. They lay crushed at the bottom of the precipice hundreds of feet below, and near them lay the huge body of the dead grizzly.

"No more grizzlies and narrow ledges hanging in the skies for me," Mr. Judson declared, as the waggons began again moving along the narrow road; and every one of the company echoed the sentiment most emphatically.

The roadway now began to descend the mountain-side, and in a short time reached a valley, where a spring of drinkable water and a little grass told them that they had come to the end of the fifty-mile stretch of barrenness over which they had been travelling with hardly a pause for nearly twenty hours, and they at once went into camp, too tired even to consider how thankful they should be that this perilous portion of the journey was safely over.

The next day our friends passed through Echo Canyon, whose vari-coloured walls of red, white, and yellow, topped with fantastic-shaped rocks, looked, to the delighted eyes of the children, like a fairyland of mystical castles, towers, pinnacles, and ancient cathedrals, while the little river, winding through shady groves in the grass-covered valley below, was an even more pleasing sight to the tired men, who rested in the shade of the trees while the glad oxen and horses fed on the rich grass.

A few days later, near the close of a beautiful September day, the little party paused at the mouth of Emigrant Canyon, and looked down on a scene not one of them ever forgot. Below them, north and south, stretched a vast plain, threaded with shining streams of water, green with grass and the leaves of trees,

yellow with fields of ripening grain, and framed, on the west and north and east, with the beetling precipices and rocky slopes of great mountains. In the midst of this Delectable Valley, surrounded by cultivated fields and orchards, lay that wonderful city in the wilderness—Great Salt Lake City.

Now, if you will remember that not one of the party had seen a town, or even a house worthy of the name, or a cultivated field of growing crops, or any other signs of civilised life for nearly three months, you can imagine something of the ecstasies of delight with which our friends, especially the children, gazed down on this beautiful picture of moving civilised human life, and how eagerly they longed to be in its midst.

The descent of the mountainside was made that afternoon, and late that night our friends went into camp near the Warm Springs a little to the north of the town, and when they rolled themselves up in their blankets to go to sleep, the distant sounds of the little city made music in their ears and sweetened their dreams.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE CITY OF THE SAINTS

SALT LAKE CITY, the City of the Great Salt Lake, had been founded by the Mormons, who called themselves the "Latter-day Saints of the Church of Jesus Christ," only two years before, in the midst of what was then an absolute wilderness, inhabited solely by wild beasts and savages, a thousand miles from any civilised community—a marvellous thing to do, and marvellously had the town grown within that short period. It was now a well laid out city nearly four miles long by three in width, inhabited by some eight thousand people.

Near the centre of the city was a large public square, and hither our friends drove in the early morning and pitched their camp in the midst of a large company of emigrants, who were here recruiting themselves and animals before undertaking the hard journey across the barren salt plains west of Great Salt Lake.

"My, but don't it seem good to see real houses with real people living in them, and real gardens with real flowers and vegetables growing in them!" Mildred exclaimed, as she and the boys wandered about the little city together later in the day.

"Yes," Arthur answered laughing, "but it would seem a jolly lot better to be eating some of the real

vegetables and fruits from those gardens. I never had anything taste so good to me before as those new potatoes did we had this morning—and the butter and eggs and radishes and cabbage!" and Arthur licked his chops and smacked his lips at the recollection of the feast they had all had that morning on fresh meat and butter and eggs and vegetables and fruits.

"And what do you think!" Ray declared, grinning. "This morning I actually saw two men eating at a table with a white table-cloth and china dishes on it, and the men had napkins, real white napkins, and I saw one of them wipe his mouth with his napkin just as unconcernedly as if he was accustomed to doing it every day."

The children laughed so merrily that a sad-faced woman, with a little baby in her arms and two small children clinging to her skirts, came to the door of a nearby cottage and regarded them curiously, as if wondering what they could find to laugh about in this sad old world, while another woman and three more small children looked out at them through an opened window of the same cottage.

"Wonder if there are any more women and babies stowed away in that one small house?" Arthur queried, staring at the two women and the children.

"Well, I should say!" Ray exclaimed, as another window was thrown open and a third woman thrust a head out that was quickly surrounded by half a dozen other smaller heads. "The show has only just begun."

"Poor women!" Mildred said sympathetically, her face sobering. "They don't look happy."

"Poor man!" Arthur retorted laughingly. "Think

of living in a little house like that with three women and an even dozen of children, the oldest not over seven years of age!"

"He'd no business to marry more than one woman then!" Mildred snapped back, her face flushing. "Besides, the man don't have to stay in the house and mind the children the way the women do. I don't see how any woman can marry a Mormon. I wouldn't marry the best Mormon that ever lived. It's wicked," and her eyes flashed indignantly.

"Well, it does look rather tough, no matter from which side you look at it," Ray interposed philosophically. "Tough for the man and tough for the women and tough for the children. Now—" He stopped abruptly and stared down the street. "See—look there! Those two men!" and he pointed to where two men sat talking earnestly together on a large rock some twenty rods farther on down the street. "The man on this side. It's—it's——"

"Slim George, the gambler!" broke in Arthur excitedly. "Come, let's get behind that hedge before he sees us," and he hurried toward a hedge of young trees that surrounded a nearby plot of ground, followed by Mildred and Ray.

"I wonder who that is with him," Ray said, the moment they were safely hidden by the trees. "I am going to try and see," and he began creeping along the hedge, looking for an opening through which he might see the two men. He found the opening, looked through it, and quickly beckoned to Arthur and Mildred.

"He's handing the man some money," he whispered excitedly when Arthur and Mildred stood by his side.

"And now they are shaking hands and saying good-bye."

By this time Arthur and Mildred had each found a hole through the hedge and were watching the two men. Evidently they had come upon the gambler and his companion just as they were about to conclude the interview, for, after standing for a few moments with hands tightly gripped, they parted, the gambler going on down the street and his companion coming directly toward the spot where the children were hidden.

"Let's pretend we are sitting down in the shade of the hedge resting," Mildred said, quickly seating herself on the grass. "He doesn't know us, and then we can get a good look at him when he goes by."

Ray and Arthur promptly seated themselves by her side, and hardly had they done so when around a little turn in the street came Slim George's companion. He was a tall, lank man, with a long face and a large hooked nose, on each side of which twinkled a small shifty black eye that looked as if it were constantly on the search for something that it could never find. Evidently he was in a hurry, for he walked swiftly by the children, barely noticing them as he passed, and on down the street in the direction of the emigrant encampment on the public square.

"He's no Mormon," Ray declared, as the children arose to continue their stroll. "Looks like a hard-luck emigrant. Wish I knew what that gambler was paying him money for."

"If wishes were horses, then all the beggars might ride," Arthur replied lightly. "For my part I am more than willing to leave the Sinful Four strictly alone, so long as they don't bother us, and if they do try to give

us any trouble, I guess Big Tom Rawlins and Mr. Judson, to say nothing of Jud Jimpson and his rifle, would be more than a match for a dozen like them."

By this time the three children had reached the outskirts of the little city, and were about to turn back when Mildred's eyes were attracted by a number of queer-looking little dwelling-places clustered together at the end of one of the side streets.

"What funny houses!" she exclaimed, pointing toward them. "They look like the tops of waggons taken off the wheels and set on the ground."

"And that's exactly what they are," Ray declared. "You see the Mormons are coming in here faster than they can build houses for them, and so they just set their covered waggon-boxes on the ground, put a little stove in them, and make themselves as comfortable as possible. That's why the Mormons get on so splendid—they make the best of everything."

"I should say they did," Arthur agreed. "See how they have made use of the river to water their gardens and crops. Why, every little garden has a little stream of water running to it. They are independent of the rain," and he glanced up and down the street, where little streams of water ran along each side, from which diverged smaller streams to every garden-plot along the street. In this way the entire city was irrigated, giving life and beauty and verdure to what had been a barren waste.

"Well, I don't care," Mildred persisted. "I don't like the Mormons, anyway, even if they have made the desert to bloom like the rose, and I think it is time we were getting back to camp. I am tired of looking at Mormons."

The boys laughed, and at once turned their steps toward the emigrant camp on the public square.

As they came up to the spot where their waggons and tents stood, a tall, lank fellow came out from behind one of the waggons, where he had been talking with the three men, and passed them on his way to his own camp, so close that they might have touched him.

"The man we saw with the gambler!" Ray whispered excitedly, staring after the man, who made no sign of having recognised the children.

"Let's hurry and tell papa," and Mildred started on the run to where her father and Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins sat talking together in the shade of one of the waggons, while the rest of the party were gathered in a group in front of the two tents.

"Hello! What's up now? Mormons trying to abduct you?" and Mr. Judson turned quickly to Mildred, who rushed up to him much as if a hundred Mormons were hot after her.

"No—but—who was that man you were just talking with? And what did he want? We—we saw him talking with that gambler you call Slim George, and the gambler handed him some money, and——"

"He must have come straight from the gambler here," broke in Ray.

"We hid behind a hedge so that he did not see us —I mean the gambler didn't," continued Mildred. "What did he want, papa?"

"Why, he's a gold-seeker from somewhere in Illinois, and just came over to have a chat with us 'bout California and the best way to get there from here," Mr. Judson answered. "Them pesky rascals," and his face clouded. "What do you suppose they are up to

now?" and he turned to Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins.

"'Pears tew me," Jud Jimpson responded, "that they've been tryin' tew do sum pumpin', an' that that there feller was their pump. He was mighty inquisitive."

"I fancy Jud's hit it 'bout right," Tom Rawlins declared. "He asked too many questions to suit me. I never did like a feller with that sort of nose, anyhow. Always sticking itself into other people's business. But what are them skunks after? That's what I'd like to know."

"And I told him all about our plans," Mr. Judson said disgustedly. "Now," and his face hardened, "I propose that we give them fellows the slip by starting on the trail early to-morrow morning instead of waiting here a couple of more days as I told him we were going to. If he's in with the Sinful Four, he'll be likely to go to them to-night and give them all the information he got out of us, and so they won't be looking for us to start for a couple of days, and maybe we can get so far along before they discover that we've gone that they can't catch up with us. Our critters are in good condition, and the sooner we get to California the better, anyway. What do you say? I'm sick of having that crowd tagging us. Let's try and ship them for good."

Tom and Jud agreed with Mr. Judson, and accordingly our friends determined to break camp and start again on their way for the gold mines early in the morning. The rest of the day they were busy buying the few supplies they needed and getting everything in readiness for leaving Salt Lake City. This was done as quietly as possible, so as to keep their going a secret

from the other emigrants. They saw no more of the tall, lank man until about nine o'clock that night, when he passed their camp-fire and stopped to have a few minutes' chat with the men.

"I heared tew-day that th' Snake Injuns west of th' lake are thirstin' for white blood," he said. "Some fool emigrants got intew a row with 'em an' killed some on 'em, an' now they're a-layin' for th' whites. I reckon 'twouldn't be a bad plan for a few on us tew join forces while goin' through their country, an' seein' that we're both plannin' tew start th' same day, I calculate 'twould be a good idear for us tew hook together for mutual pertection. No harm done, if bein' your wantin' no company," and he paused and his shifty black eyes passed quickly from face to face in the little group around the Judson camp-fire.

"That's a good idea, neighbour," Mr. Judson replied with seeming heartiness, "and if your critters are in shape to keep up with ourn, I reckon we'll go you. Come over to-morrow afternoon and we'll talk it over. Going to be away from camp in the forenoon. An improving lot of people, these Mormons. They've made this barren country to bloom like a flower garden."

"Yes," scowled the man, "but an ornery lot of thieves, every last one on 'em. They'd steal th' coppers off a dead man's eyes. I've got no kind of use for Mormons," and his shifty eyes glittered wickedly.

For five or ten minutes longer he stood and talked by the camp-fire, and then returned to his camp, which he said was "t'other side of th' square," promising to be over the next afternoon to talk over the "hooking together" proposition.

"Well, if he ain't a sneak of some kind, then I can't read eyes and noses," declared Tom Rawlins, as soon as the man was out of hearing.

"'Tain't no face of an angel he's got, that's sartain," agreed Jud Jimpson. "An' if he ain't sheriff's meat of some kind, then I don't know buffler hump when I'm eatin' it."

"Now," and Mr. Judson arose from the waggon tongue on which he had been sitting, "if we get started before daylight to-morrow morning, everybody better be getting into their blankets. I am going to bed."

All saw the wisdom of following Mr. Judson's example, and in ten minutes our friends, with the exception of the guard, were slumbering as peacefully and much more sweetly in their blankets than they had ever done in their beds in their far Eastern homes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

NEWS OF THE SINFUL FOUR

"NOW, we're on the home-stretch!" Ray shouted jubilantly early the next morning, as Mildred and Arthur and he galloped on ahead of the slow-moving waggons that had already crossed the River Jordan and left the City of the Saints behind them. "And our next stopping-place will be the gold mines themselves! Hurrah for California! We're almost there! Hurrah!" and he jerked off his hat and swung it around his head and yelled just from sheer exuberance of youthful spirits, and for the same splendid reason Mildred and Arthur joined their voices to his and shouted till their voices rang far ahead over the desolate plain toward the still distant Land of Golden Promises.

"Wouldn't it be great if we should discover a gold mine?" Arthur said a few minutes later, after they had blown off their excess of steam and had quieted down, "and find enough gold to make us rich enough to buy a dozen farms like that of old Thompson's? What would you do with your cash, if we should, Ray?"

They were now walking their horses and riding side by side, with Mildred between the two boys, and it was a minute or two before Ray answered Arthur, his

face sobering and his eyes becoming pensive as he spoke.

"I've thought a great deal about that," he confessed, his face flushing just a little, "and I have planned just what to do if I should be so lucky as to find the gold," and his eyes began to sparkle. "First, I'd try and learn who my mother was and find her folks, and if they were poor I'd help them, and then I'd try and find out all I could about my father's family, and if they needed help I'd help them, too. I'd—I'd like to feel as if I belonged to somebody. You know I have father's ring," and he thrust his hand down his neck and caught hold of the cord to which the ring was attached and pulled it out, "and that ought to help me. It's such a curious ring that any one who had seen it once would be almost sure to remember it if they should see it again," and he held the golden circlet up and looked longingly at the two gold vipers whose intertwined bodies formed the ring, and whose jaws held upraised the beautiful blood-red ruby that he had been told was of great value. "If they could only speak," he had often thought. "If they could only speak, what might they not be able to tell me?"

"And this is all that you have to remember your father or mother or relatives or anybody," and Mildred touched the ring almost reverently, while the tears came into her eyes. "I had a little baby brother once before I was born," she continued softly, "and a wicked woman, his nurse, stole him, and papa and mamma never, never found him again, but please don't say anything to mamma and papa about it, because mamma always cries and papa looks so sad whenever anything is said about baby brother. I just wanted to let you

know that we have had our troubles, too, and—and could feel for you, for both of you boys," and she turned to Arthur. "Of course you would try and find your folks, too, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, yes," and Arthur's eyes grew moist. "If I only could find my father and mother, I'd gladly give all the gold there is in California, if I had it. You don't know how it feels never to have known who your father and mother were. But I haven't even a ring to help me find my parents, only my name, and like as not that is not my real name. But what's the use of crying over spilt milk? 'Twon't make the cream come. Only I would like to find my father and mother, somehow I feel as if they were both still living; and if I do find any gold I'll gladly spend every cent of it, if I have to, hunting for them— There, that's Jud calling for us, and I fancy that means that we are getting too far from the waggons, so we'd better stop here and wait until they catch up."

"If you yunks don't want tew be gobbled up by them Snake Injuns, you'd better keep nigh th' waggins," Jud Jimpson said as the waggons came slowly up to where the children were awaiting them. "We're gittin' out of God's country an' intew th' other feller's, where I reckon them Snake Injuns 'll be right ter home," and he grinned.

And, indeed, to our little party of emigrants, fresh from the blooming verdure of the Great Salt Lake Valley, it did begin to look as if they were "gittin' out of God's country," as Jud Jimpson said, and entering regions with which a beneficent Being never had had anything to do. With every mile travelled their surroundings became more desolate, wild, and barren. In

front of them the land stretched away in a great level alkali plain, with here and there a ridge of bleak rocks jutting up above its surface like islands in a sea. No grass grew on this plain except in small, dry, scattered bunches, nor a tree, nor a shrub of any kind, save the desert sage-brush, which seems to be able to flourish in a soil that will support no other kind of vegetation. Stagnant pools of water, thick and brown and poisonous with alkali, stood by the trail-side, and farther on they came to where springs of water boiled, hissing hot from hidden fires, to the surface, and formed in pools, sometimes of considerable extent. Truly a grimly desolate prospect for our friends.

The third night out from Salt Lake City they camped near a number of these hot springs, some of which had formed bluish pools of clear water, with clean, pebbly bottoms, just warm enough for a delightful bath, while others were so hot that one might have boiled an egg in their waters, and curiously enough the hottest of these pools stood not six feet from the coolest, where the water chilled the touch.

That night everybody had great sport bathing. The two tents were placed over two pools of water of exactly the right size and temperature, forming the most delightful and luxuriant baths imaginable, and in one of these the "women folks" and in the other the "men folks" bathed, until, as Arthur put it, they all felt like "new whistles." The air during the past two days had been loaded with hot alkali dust, and their eyes and ears and noses and mouths were filled with it, while it covered their skins in layers, and nothing more pleasant and grateful to their weary dust-covered bodies could be imagined than these warm baths.

"I feel as if I had a new skin and new muscles and new bones," Ray declared as he and Arthur came out of their novel bath-room. "Never had a bath do me so much good before in my life. Why, every joint feels as if it had been freshly oiled."

"Can't beat Old Dame Nater when she sets out tew do a thing," Jud Jimpson avouched. "Not for a million dollars could you build baths like them. There's somethin' in them waters that goes tew every ache an' soreness in th' body. It's better'n takin' a bath in arnica."

This was the verdict of all, and there probably was some healing quality in the waters, which were impregnated with minerals brought from the bowels of the earth.

The next day our friends came to another of nature's wonders—a salt plain. At first the plain consisted simply of dried mud, thickly covered with small salt crystals, but as they advanced the salt became thicker and thicker until the entire ground was covered with a thin layer of soft, moist salt, through which the feet of their oxen and horses sank at every step into the mud beneath. A couple of miles farther on the salt became dry and solid, and to their astonishment they found themselves walking upon a solid sheet of pure salt that covered the ground to the depth of nearly an inch, and was as white and clean-looking as any table salt they had ever eaten. For miles to the right and the left and in front of them stretched this plain of dazzling whiteness, where millions of bushels of the purest salt lay ready for table use.

"My goodness, there must be enough salt here to supply all creation until Gabriel blows his trumpet!"

Mildred exclaimed, looking wonderingly at the vast white plain.

"And to think," Arthur exulted, his face glowing with enthusiasm, "that all this wonderful country, with its vast plains and lofty mountains and broad rivers and natural wonders, over which we've been steadily journeying for months, is but a part of our great nation, and a part that has not yet even been settled! My, but won't the United States be a great nation when all this wilderness is covered with farms and villages and cities, the greatest nation the world has ever seen! I'm glad I was born in the United States, where such great things are to be done."

"So am I, but I'd be gladder just now," the more practical Ray declared, "if this plain was covered with green grass that our critters could eat, with here and there a little water that we could drink, instead of this wonderful salt that isn't any good to any of us. If this salt don't come to an end pretty soon, I don't see where we are to get any water to drink or any grass for our oxen and horses, and just the sight of so much salt makes me thirsty. I feel as if I could drink a barrelful right now."

For a couple of hours longer the hard crust of white salt continued under their feet, and then it became gradually thinner and thinner, until at last it disappeared altogether, and scattered clumps of sage-brush and bunch-grass told them that they had again come to where green things might grow.

The next day they passed out of this region of wonders, and for many weary days toiled slowly along the hot dusty trail, through a desolate uninteresting tract of rough country that lay between the Great Salt Lake

Valley and the head-waters of Humboldt River. Grass and water were scarce, and both were impregnated with alkali, and the oxen began to grow thin and weak and to show signs of the dreaded alkali poisoning that caused the death of so many thousands of the animals of the emigrants.

The line of emigrants before and behind them was now thin and scattered, a line of weary travel-worn gaunt men and women, and foot-sore, starving animals that were continually falling by the roadside to leave their bones where they fell. At one place, near a spring of alkali water, they found ten oxen lying together, poisoned by the water, and near them stood two dismantled waggons with their goods scattered about on the ground. In front of the spring the unfortunate emigrant had thrust into the ground a piece of one of the waggon tongues, to which he had nailed an end-board with this warning written in large black letters on it:

DON'T LET YOUR CRITTERS DRINK OUT OF THIS SPRING—MINE DID—AND THERE THEY BE.

This was followed by a rudely drawn hand, with index finger extended and pointing to the dead oxen. A fearful reminder at what a sacrifice of life and suffering the yet undug gold of California was being purchased.

Before they reached the Humboldt River two of their own oxen, the wheel-yoke of Tom Rawlins's waggon, gave out and had to be abandoned, and for the first time our friends were compelled to lighten the load for the two remaining yokes by throwing away such of the goods as could be most easily spared from the waggon.

There were tears in Mildred's eyes when they drove on one morning and left these two faithful animals, that had served them for so many weary miles, standing weakly by the trail's side and regarding their departure with uneasy eyes, as if wondering why they were to be thus deserted, but the thought that they were leaving them in a pleasant little valley where there was an abundance of grass and water gave comfort to her tender heart.

"I hope you will get well and strong and live a long and comfortable life, you good old faithful oxen," she called back to them, waving her hand in farewell as she turned and rode after the waggons.

All along the trail, since leaving Salt Lake City, rumours of threatening dangers from the enraged Snake Indians were passing to and fro, and our friends were ever on their guard, but only once did they get sight of any of these Indians, and then they had only a glimpse, for the Indians, a dozen or so men and squaws, fled at the first sight of the whites, as if fearful of their lives. Evidently they had had all the dealings with the treacherous white man they cared for, and had come to the conclusion that their only safety lay in keeping out of his reach, at least while so many of his white brothers were passing through their country.

Our friends entered into a more favourable country when the head-waters of the Humboldt were reached, where the trail ran through a narrow valley along the side of the stream. Here the grass was plenty and the water was at least fit to drink, while the willows growing along the water's edge furnished them with an abundance of fuel.

"Now, I calculate we'd better ease up a bit," Mr.

Judson said, when they camped one night in this pleasant valley, "and give the critters a chance to pick up some flesh and strength before tackling the desert beyond the Humboldt Sink. They're mighty near petered out and full of alkali, and if we ain't careful they'll never live to get across that stretch of desert."

Accordingly, the journey down the valley of the Humboldt was made in easy stages, but the wearied animals did not appear to gather flesh and strength as they should, and when, some two weeks later, the little party reached the Sink, where the waters of the Humboldt spread out into a boggy, reed-covered lake and were lost in the sands of the desert, they were still weak and thin. But our friends did not dare to delay longer. It was now nearing the middle of October and winter was coming, and the dreaded Sierra Nevada Mountains were yet to be crossed.

Before them lay a desert some eighty-five miles wide, where there was neither grass nor water and where the hot sun scorched and burned as if focussed by an enormous sun-glass, and before crossing this Land of Hot Miseries, they must cut grass for their horses and oxen and fill every available vessel with water. Accordingly, notwithstanding their haste, it was determined to spend a day here getting everything in readiness for the crossing of the desert.

Along the boggy edges of the lake the grass grew thick and coarse, and every one able to use a knife or other cutting instrument, including Mildred and her mother and Mrs. Jimpson, each armed with a pair of shears, was soon busy "making hay" for the cattle, and when a sufficient quantity of this had been cut it was dried and tightly packed in the waggons. Then

the water vessels, everything that would hold water, were filled and securely placed in the waggons. This had taken considerable time, for the grass-cutting with knives and shears was slow work, and the water-soaked grass, after cutting, had to be spread out on the ground to dry, and it was three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day after they had reached the Sink before everything was in readiness to continue their journey, and the word was given to yoke up.

About the Sink were a number of emigrant camps, some waiting for their worn-out animals to get strong enough to venture with them across the desert, and others cutting grass and making ready for the journey. As they passed one of these camps a man hailed them.

"Hello!" he called. "Your friends thought you had gone on across the desert, and started hotfooted after you early yesterday morning, hardly stopping long enough to get grass and water for their critters."

"Well, that's news, comrade," Mr. Judson called back, bringing the oxen to a halt, "seeing that we've left all our friends many miles behind us. I reckon your shot has hit the wrong party."

"No," and the man's eyes swept over the Judson outfit. "I'd swear that's the right combination, accordin' to the description given me. Red waggon, drawn by two yokes of big red oxen and driven by a fellow 'bout six and a half feet tall. T'other waggon with some poetry 'bout goin' clear through to the Sacramento writ on its cover. Three kids, one of them a gal, ridin' on horses. Two women and more kids in the waggons, and a little black nigger boy. No, neighbour, I reckon my shot hit the bull's-eye plumb in the centre. Leastwise

them four fellows drivin' that big span of mules got your description down pat."

"Great Moses, I thought we had given that Sinful Four the slip for good this time!" and Mr. Judson's eyes flashed angrily. "And here they are ahead of us again and looking for us," and he turned a troubled face to Mrs. Judson, who sat on the front seat of the waggon.

"Well," Jud Jimpson grinned, "'tain't so bad as it might be, seein' that they fancy we're ahead on 'em, an' are a-tryin' tew overhaul us. I reckon 'twill take 'em sum time tew catch up with us goin' that way," and his grin broadened. "But it beats me what they're so tarnal anxious for our company for."

"Thank you, comrade," and Mr. Judson turned to the man who had hailed them. "We do know them four scoundrels, and the farther they keep away from us the better we'll like it."

"Then," and the man laughed, "you'd better just let them keep a-goin' a-tryin' to catch up with you."

"'Twon't be by our stopping them, if they quit this side of the Pacific. G'n lang! Haw, there!" and the long lash of Mr. Judson's whip cracked over the backs of his oxen, and the wheels of the waggons were again rolling toward the hot sands of the desert.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE CRY IN THE DESERT

THE trail across the desert was through an abominable country, covered with loose black, yellow, and red stones of all sizes, and split masses of rocks, over which the waggons jolted and the oxen stumbled, while the wheels sank nearly to their hubs in the dust, that rose in hot clouds and settled thickly on man and beast and waggons. The sky above was absolutely cloudless, and the sun was like the open door of an immense furnace pouring its heat directly down on the parched and shrivelled earth. The hot air rose in hot waves from the hot ground, and the distant hills and piles of rocks looked seared and cracked, as if they had been baked in some enormous oven and then dumped red-hot on the ground. Ahead and behind them, at intervals of a mile or more, trudged other parties of emigrants, enveloped in dust clouds, but as they advanced and overtook and passed party after party, the line of emigrants ahead grew thinner and thinner, until only the lifeless, shrivelled desert stretched before them.

There was no stopping to camp that night, only brief pauses every two or three hours for rest and to give the animals a few mouthfuls of the cut grass and a little water, and then on they would go. The stars

came out and the moon came up and shone down on the wild, desolate scene, and still on and on they plodded. The dead stillness of the dead desert was all around them. The creak of the waggon-wheels, the crack of the ox-whips, the thud, thud of the hoofs of the animals, all had a strangely weird sound in that unnatural silence. Few words were spoken. No one cared to talk. All were oppressed with the gloom and silence of the desert, all were wearied in body and in mind, but still on they moved. The moon rose high and began to go down in the western skies. The leg-weary oxen, hungry and thirsty, faltered in their yokes. The heads of the horses drooped, and they moved their feet listlessly. Ray and Arthur and Mildred walked by the sides of their horses. No one, save the three youngest Jimpson children, rode. The oxen must be spared every possible pound of weight. In the early dawn they came to a huge outcropping ledge of rocks, and here they halted for a couple of hours' rest.

The oxen and the horses were given a little of the cut grass to eat and a little of the precious water to drink, and then all—men and beasts—stretched themselves out on the earth, too exhausted to make a move unless compelled to do so.

At the end of the two hours, stiff and sore and hungry and thirsty, the tedious journey was resumed. The sun had now risen and the heat soon became oppressive. In two hours more the air felt almost burning hot against the naked cheeks and hands. The oxen began to show signs of extreme exhaustion, and at last one of Mr. Judson's wheelers fell in his yoke to the ground, and in a few minutes was dead. The oxen must have

rest and water. Animal strength could not longer toil on and endure the heat and the thirst.

"We will camp here until the heat of the day is past," Mr. Judson said, beginning to unyoke his oxen.

In a few minutes the oxen were unyoked, and each was given a few swallows of the now doubly precious water and a little bundle of grass, and the horses were fed a little grass and given a little water. Then the two tents were pitched on the hot sand and, almost completely worn out, our friends threw themselves down on the ground beneath their grateful shade, and in five minutes, in spite of the heat and their thirst, so great was their exhaustion, all were sound asleep. There was no need of keeping guard. Not another living thing was in sight on the desert, except a few crows and other carrion birds that floated high above the shimmering heat, waiting for the emigrants to pass on and leave their dead behind them.

Not until five o'clock in the afternoon, when the scorching heat of the sun had lessened, was the word given to make ready to continue the journey. Then they found three more of their oxen and one of the horses unable to rise, and in grim mercy they shot the poor beasts to end their misery. The carrion birds were certain to have a rich feast.

This left them but two yokes of hungry, thirsty, worn-out oxen to each waggon.

"Them waggins must be light'ed," Jud Jimpson said, his eyes on the gaunt oxen that looked hardly able to support their own weight. "Them critters can't do much more than drag themselves over this rough trail."

Accordingly, a little pile of precious goods was made

there on the desert sands, and left with sad forebodings of what was yet to come.

"It seems almost wicked to leave them things here after we have carried them so far and through so many troubles," Mildred said, the tears in her eyes, as our little party again began its weary tramp. "I don't think any amount of gold can ever repay us for such sufferings. Look at Beauty. She don't act as if she could stand it to go much farther without plenty of food and water, and I heard papa say that there wasn't enough water left to give the animals more than one more drink, and the grass is nearly all gone, and—and I can't do anything for Beauty, not even to save her life, and I know by the way she looks at me that she feels as if I ought to get her something to eat and to drink, and I can't," and the poor girl's voice choked.

"Cheer up, little one," and Big Tom Rawlins, near whom the children were walking, laid one of his great hands softly on the curls on Mildred's head. "We'll be across this desert in a short time now, and where there's grass and water a-plenty, and then there'll be only the mountains between us and the gold of California. Never fear, Beauty is as tough as hickory, and will pull through all right— Hello! See what luck we're in by the side of those poor fellows!" and he pointed to an abandoned waggon that stood directly in the trail a little way ahead of them, and which had been hidden from view by a ridge of rocks over which they were now passing.

For a minute Ray and Arthur and Mildred stared at the waggon, their senses dulled by heat and thirst and fatigue, and then the three uttered an exclamation almost in the same breath, and Ray shouted: "That's

the gambler's waggon! That's the waggon of Slim George, the gambler! I'd know it anywhere by the big patch on the side of the cover."

"Well, if it's the Sinful Four that's having such hard luck, I'm not feeling so tremendously bad over it," Tom Rawlins declared. "Not that I'd want any mortal to perish in this God-forsaken hole, but a considerable lot of suffering won't do that gang any harm."

By this time they had reached the waggon, and a halt was made to see if Ray's assertion could be verified.

On the ground about the waggon were scattered various articles, that had evidently been taken from the waggon for the purpose of packing them on the two mules, and then discarded for want of room.

"Dat am Massah Tom Pike's ol' ca'petbag fo' sho'! I done know, 'cause I's toted it 'bout er t'ousan' millyun miles," and Scoot made a dive for one of those old-fashioned hand-bags, usually called carpetbags, that were so common in those days, which lay wide open in the dust by the side of the waggon. "An' h'ar am his ol' Sunday-go-to-meetin' hat," and the little black hands jerked out of the bag an old and very much battered plug hat, a relic of the better days Tom Pike had doubtless seen. "I done know dat hat like I does my own face. Massah Tom Pike was a bo'ned gemmen, 'deed he was, down in ol' Kentuck. I comed ob a good family," and the little black form straightened up proudly.

"I reckon you did, Scoot," Mr. Judson laughed. "But now that we've settled that the waggon belonged to the Sinful Four, we must be getting on," and his troubled eyes turned to the west. "I hope we don't come upon that bunch of scoundrels in this desert, when they're driven desperate by their needs. They'd be

worse than hungry tigers," he said in a lower voice to Jud Jimpson, who walked by his side as the journey was resumed.

"If we do I calculate we'll be able tew 'tend tew 'em," Jud answered grimly. "'Tain't them rascals that I'm 'feard of. We've," and he lowered his voice so that the women and children could not hear him, "got tew hit water an' grass afore sunup tew-morrow or we'll lose every critter we've got. More'n half th' water has leaked out," and his bronzed face whitened. "If we'd keep up our own strength an' senses, we can't spare th' animals more'n another swallow, an' they're pretty nigh goners now."

For a time the two men walked on in gloomy silence, their hearts too heavy for speech. Each was thinking of his dear ones, and the horror of what might happen if their animals should give out and they should become stranded on the hot sands of the desert without water, where water was life.

A short time before sundown the little party halted on the top of a sand ridge, and the three men gathered in a group apart from the others to consider the situation, while Mrs. Judson and Mrs. Jimpson and the children flung themselves down on the sand, too tired to move, and watched them with anxious eyes. Remember that for over twenty-four hours, with only a pause now and then and a rest through the hot hours of the day, they had been walking, not daring to add their weight to the burdens of the oxen and horses, through the heat and dust and sand of the desert, without sufficient water and food, and you will not wonder at their exhaustion nor at the anxiety in the eyes they turned toward the group of men.

For some five or ten minutes the three men stood talking together, then they carefully examined the oxen and horses and the water vessels, and then, after consulting together again for a few minutes, they approached the little group of anxious watchers.

"We've been holding a council of war," Mr. Judson said, smiling cheerfully, "and have come to the conclusion that this little army is carrying altogether too much baggage, and that we could get along a lot faster if we had only one waggon to bother with, and so we're going to leave Tom Rawlins's red waggon here on the top of this sand ridge for a roosting place for the crows and a den for the coyotes, and go on with the one waggon. Now everybody perk up, for I reckon we're almost 'cross this tarnal desert. Seems like I could smell water when I turn my nose to the west. And with only one waggon for the oxen to drag, we'll get on like a house afire."

The remaining four yokes of oxen were now all hitched to the Judson waggon, a few necessary goods from the abandoned waggon transferred to it, another little pile made on the sand of the things that could be spared under the stress of this dire necessity, a little water drank and given to each of the animals, and then the journey was resumed. No one looked back toward the abandoned waggon as they moved slowly on toward the west. No one had the heart to look back.

The three men strode along by the sides of the oxen; Mrs. Jimpson and her children and Mrs. Judson rode in the waggon, unable to walk farther; Mildred sat on the back of Beauty, so exhausted that she could hardly hold herself erect in the saddle; Scoot clung to the bony

back of Turpentine, too tired even to roll his eyes; but Ray and Arthur still pluckily walked by the sides of Getthere and Black Duke, although their feet felt like twenty-pound chunks of lead, and there was an ache in almost every bone in their bodies.

"Tough, isn't it, Art?" Ray said, as the two boys plodded along side by side through the sand. "My legs feel as if they had hunks of lead fastened to them in place of feet, but," and he glanced anxiously toward Getthere, whose drooping head and gaunt, panting flanks told of his suffering from thirst and exhaustion, "we've just got to walk as long as our legs will move, or our horses will never pull through, and—and I'd gladly walk both legs off to save Getthere. It's the lack of water that makes them so weak. A horse can't stand such heat as this without plenty of water, and now there is not another drop to give them! We've just got to walk as long as we can keep on our feet, and then, if we should give out, you'll do your best to pull us through, won't you, old boy?" and Ray threw one arm affectionately around the lowered neck of Getthere, and the horse, as if understanding his young master's words, nickered and rubbed his nose against his side.

"I know," Arthur replied bravely, "and Black Duke acts as if he knew, too. But I really didn't imagine we'd have to go through anything like this when we started. I did not suppose there was such a hot, dusty, desolate, dismal, dreary, worthless, abominable, miserable, God-forsaken waste of country in all the world," and he glared about him at the hot sand and hot rocks and red-hot skies. "Jud was certainly right when he declared that this would be no Sunday-school

picnic excursion. And," and he lowered his voice so that Mildred, who rode near, could not hear, "I am afraid that the worst is yet to come. I know that we would not have left Tom's waggon if things did not look mighty blue. The oxen are nearly tuckered, and if they give out before we reach water and grass, then we'll have to pack things on our own and the horses' backs and hoof it, and think of what that would mean to the women folks and the children, and—and to Mildred. Poor kid, she can hardly sit on Beauty's back now. That's why we must walk and save the horses all we can—so the women and the little ones can ride on them if the oxen give out. Look, there's another lot of abandoned stuff, and I'll bet it was left by the Sinful Four," and Arthur pointed to where a number of bundles, a little pile of beans, a couple of chunks of dried meat, a small sack of flour, and various other articles lay scattered on the ground—ominous signs of the desperate need of the unfortunate emigrants ahead of them.

As they passed these melancholy evidences of misfortune, Mr. Judson stooped and picked up a small book that had been laid reverently by the side of a huge rock, as if for protection. It was a Bible, and on the fly-leaf he read, written in the delicate hand of a woman:

"To my beloved son, Thomas Pike."

Mr. Judson reverently replaced the book by the side of the rock, and left it there.

The sun went down, the moon came up, and the stars came out, and still on plodded our weary emigrants. All were now suffering violently from thirst, and the oxen were beginning to show signs of great distress,

lowing and swinging their heads from side to side and switching their tails, but still struggling faithfully on, as if they understood how much depended on their keeping their courage and strength.

About nine o'clock a stop of half an hour was made to give all a rest, and a small cupful of the precious water was given to each to drink, but there was none to spare for the suffering oxen and horses. Not over three gallons of water were now left, and there were fourteen human beings to be kept alive—less than two pints for each—and no one knew how much farther they would have to go before water was found.

"This doesn't seem real at all," Arthur said, as our little party again began their weary march over the desolate waste. "It is all like some horrible nightmare from which we will presently awake, and——"

"Find ourselves on the grass-covered banks of a gurgling stream of pure ice-cold water, I hope," interrupted Ray. "My, I never imagined water was such a precious thing before!"

"But really," continued Arthur, "I have to pinch myself to convince myself that this is really me. Everything is so strange and silent and desolate and unreal and ghostly on this moonlit desert, over which we are passing like so many phantoms. Why, even the plug—plug—plug of our horses' hoofs in the loose sand has a ghostly sound in this awful stillness——"

"Ugh! Ugh!" broke in Ray. "Let up. You are giving me the shivers— O-o-h-h-h! What was that? Did you hear that?" and he gripped Arthur hard by the shoulders, while every one, even the oxen and horses, stood stock-still and listened, half doubting

whether or not they had really heard that dread sound that had come out of the silence of the night and the desert in front of them.

For a minute the silence was absolute, and then again came that weird cry wailing through the desert.

"Ghosties! Ghosties!" shuddered Scoot, flinging both arms around Turpentine's neck and clinging there with might and main. "I done knowed we was gettin' into some scan'lous land. Oh, Lordy! Lordy! Dey's after dis niggah fo' sho'," and sliding off Turpentine's back as the strange cry again came moaning through the night, Scoot made a mad dive for the back end of the waggon, and vanished from sight.

"I'm going to find out what that cry means," and Mr. Judson gripped his rifle. "Sounds to me like a human being in mortal distress," and he started toward a pile of rocks that loomed up shadowy in the moonlight a few rods to the right of the trail, whence the weird sound had come.

"I'll go with you," and Big Tom Rawlins stepped to the side of Mr. Judson, and the two men, holding their rifles ready for instant use, walked slowly toward the pile of rocks.

They reached the rocks, stopped, and then hurried forward and bent over something lying on the ground. A moment later both men slowly straightened up and started back toward the waggon, bearing between them the moaning body of a man.

"Strike a light and light the lantern," Mr. Judson called. "I reckon the poor fellow's hurt mortal bad."

In a few minutes more the man was lying on the ground by the side of the waggon, and Mrs. Judson was bending anxiously over him, while Mr. Judson held

the lantern and the rest gathered around in a circle, their faces showing white and troubled in the dim light of the lantern.

The man had become unconscious while being borne to the waggon, and now lay motionless, outstretched on the ground, his face staring upward into the deep mystery of the starlit skies.

"He has been shot!" and Mrs. Judson lifted a white, horror-stricken face to her husband's, as she pointed to the left breast of the wounded man, where the flannel shirt was soaked red with blood. "And I fear he is dying from his wound and thirst. Who is he, Jed?" and the eyes that questioned her husband's were filled with apprehension.

"Tom Pike," Mr. Judson answered slowly. "Tom Pike, Scoot's old master. Shot and left to die alone on this desert by his comrades. God have mercy on their wicked souls!" he added solemnly.

The man moved uneasily, opened his eyes, glared blankly up at the circle of faces surrounding him, and weakly moaned: "Water! Water!"

Mrs. Judson glanced at her husband, and without a word he handed the lantern to Tom Rawlins, and going to the waggon, returned with a quart tin cup full of the precious water, and bending over Tom Pike, placed the cup to his lips. Tom Pike eagerly seized the cup with both hands and pressed it tightly to his parched mouth, and drank in great swallows until the last drop had been drained from the cup. Then his eyes slowly travelled around the circle grouped about him until they rested on the face of Mr. Judson, and here they remained for a minute or more, staring questioningly into the face looking down into his.

"Judson? You are Judson?" he asked, the white in his cheeks reddening faintly.

"Yes, yes, my name is Judson," Mr. Judson replied. "You are hurt. Let us get at the wound."

"No use. No use. I'm done for," and he feebly waved Mr. Judson back. "Bud Wilkes done it, and left me to die alone and helpless on this accursed desert! Judson! Judson!" and he looked intently at the man before him. "By heaven, I'll do it, if it takes the last breath I've got!" and the fire came into his eyes, even as the glow to a dying coal when it is blown upon. "Judson, send these others away. I have something to say to you alone," and he struggled to raise himself up on his elbows to a sitting posture.

"Quiet, quiet," and Mr. Judson pressed him gently back. "I am here, right by your side," and he knelt by the side of the wounded man and motioned to the others to fall back. "Now, what would you say to me? The others have gone. You must speak quick, for I fear your time is short."

"Judson," and the dying man caught tight hold of Mr. Judson's hand and gripped it convulsively, "Slim George and Bud and Mike are planning to rob you of that twenty-five thousand dollars you've got stowed away somewhere in your waggon before you get to the gold mines."

Mr. Judson started violently and bent closer.

"Slim George put us onto the game," continued Tom Pike, his breath beginning to shorten and the perspiration coming out in beads on his forehead. "He —he followed you clear from the bank where you cashed the money, and the reason we didn't do you sooner was because we were all bound for California,

and thought it would be safer to wait until you were almost there. Then you somehow gave us the slip at Salt Lake City and got away without our knowing it, and we've been killing the mules ever since trying to catch up with you. And the boys still think you're ahead," he chuckled. "That's why we were so anxious to get across this infernal desert that we didn't prepare proper, and——"

He choked violently, and a stream of blood gushed from his mouth and his face became ghastly white and he struggled to a sitting posture.

"Bud, Bud Wilkes!" and he shook a clenched fist. "Bud, Bud-d Wilkes, if-f—if-f I—I—" and he fell back dead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ROBBED

HALF an hour later our friends continued on their way, leaving behind them a new-made grave by the side of that lonely pile of rocks in that desolate waste. No graved headstone marked the spot, only a board thrust into the ground at the head of the grave, and on the board this epitaph, rudely printed with tar:

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR IS HARD; BUT HIS END IS HARDER.

"I didn't suppose any human being could be so wicked," Ray said, as they tramped wearily on away from that lonely grave, "as to leave a wounded companion to die like that alone on this horrible desert. It would have been more merciful to have killed him," and he shuddered at the thought of what agonies the dying man must have suffered lying there alone in the desert.

"It was terrible," Arthur agreed. "I wonder what has become of his companions. They must have been in fearful straits to do a thing like that. Even worse than we are. Oh, if this desert would only end! If it would

only end!" he moaned. "I can't, I just can't walk much longer. And—and I'm so dry that I feel as if I'd crack open— Look, look at Mildred!" he cried in alarm. "She's—she's falling from her horse!" and dropping the rein of Black Duke, he sprang to the side of Beauty just as Mildred, with a deathly white face, reeled in her saddle, and caught her in his arms as she fell.

Poor girl, she had fainted from exhaustion and thirst.

Mr. Judson saw her fall, and with a cry of agony tore her from Arthur's arms and ran with her to the waggon.

"Water! Water! Get a cup of water, quick, Cat!" he called to Mrs. Judson, who had sprung up from her seat and stood white and trembling, her eyes on Mildred's unconscious form. "She's only fainted. Don't be scart, she's only fainted."

With trembling hands Mrs. Judson seized a cup and filled it with water and hurried to where Mr. Judson knelt with Mildred in his arms by the side of the waggon.

"She's only fainted. She's only fainted," he repeated. "Now, don't get scart, Cat. She's only fainted, and the water'll bring her to in a jiffy," and he caught the cup from Mrs. Judson's hand and held it to Mildred's lips and forced some of the life-giving fluid down her parched throat, and wetting her handkerchief, laid it on her forehead.

Mildred opened her eyes and smiled weakly up into her father's face and started to speak, but Mr. Judson thrust the cup of water between her lips and forced her to drink instead.

"There, there, don't say nothing," he said soothingly. "Father understands it all. Just drink."

The water had a wonderfully reviving effect, and in a few minutes Mildred was able to help herself again, but Mr. Judson now insisted that she ride in the waggon with her mother.

A couple of miles farther on and our friends passed the dead body of a mule, stretched out on the sand by the side of the trail.

"The way of the transgressor is hard; but his end is harder," Mr. Judson said grimly. "And them scoundrels must be getting pretty nigh the end. I'll bet that's the other mule," and he pointed to where a dark object showed in the moonlight, lying by the side of the trail a few rods ahead.

And the other mule it proved to be.

"Don't look as if he'd been dead over a couple of hours," Jud Jimpson declared, as he paused for a minute by the side of the body of the mule. "Shouldn't wonder if we comed upon th' skunks themselves inside of an hour. They must be 'bout on their last pins."

For a long time now the distress and weakness of the oxen had been gradually growing greater, and they had been obliged to stop three or four times to help a fallen ox to his feet and to give them all a few minutes' rest; but the night was fast wearing away and the end of the desert must be near, for, according to all reports, it was not over eighty-five miles across, and they must have travelled seventy miles or more of that distance.

By this time, too, our friends were suffering fearfully from thirst, but they dared not touch the little water that remained—not yet. It was all that stood between

them and a horrible death, and must be treasured for the last desperate emergency.

Just at sunrise they came to where the trail crossed over a steep ridge of rocks, and at the foot of this ascent they found three rifles, three revolvers, a little pile of ammunition, three heavy hunting-knives, and three little bundles done up in red handkerchiefs—all thrown together by the side of the trail.

"I reckon that means the end," and Mr. Judson's stern face hardened. "A man don't throw away his guns in this country as long as he's got strength to carry them. Shouldn't wonder if we found the men themselves on the top of the ridge," and he glanced apprehensively up to where a pile of rocks stood at the very top of the ridge a half a mile away. "This climb is going to be killing on the oxen," and he turned his eyes anxiously on the poor beasts that stood with feet braced apart and heads hanging low, seemingly hardly able to hold up the yokes around their necks.

Here the animals were given half an hour's rest, and our friends moistened their parched lips and throats with a swallow of the treasured water, and then the ascent was begun. Not for over five minutes at a time could the weakened animals pull the waggon through the heavy sand up the incline, but the faithful beasts did their best, struggling until they dropped in their yokes, and at last the top was reached. But they could go no farther. Even the inexperienced eyes of Ray and Arthur saw that it would be useless to attempt to have them pull the waggon or even carry their own weight farther until they had been invigorated with water, and there was not a drop of water to give them!

The oxen had stopped on a level plot of ground

some five rods from the summit of the ridge, but Ray and Arthur, anxious to see what lay beyond, had hurried on to the top. The moment they reached the summit both boys whirled about in great excitement and began waving their arms around their heads like windmills gone mad.

"Water! Water! Hurrah! Water!" they yelled. "A whole riverful of water! Hurrah!"

The three men dropped their ox-whips and started on the run for a sight of the blessed water, followed by the two women and the children, as fast as their stiffened legs could carry them, and this is what they saw, or seemed to see, when the ridge-top was reached. Below them, apparently not more than a mile away, glistening in the morning sunlight, a blue stream of water wound its way through scattered groves of trees and between grass-covered banks, and on its pleasant shores groups of emigrants were encamped, their white-topped waggons and tents showing plainly.

For a minute the three men stared at the delightful scene in silent amazement. They knew that, according to all reports, there should be no such a stream of water there, but there it was, so clear and distinct that even their experienced eyes were deceived for an instant, and then, as a wave-like tremor swept over the beautiful landscape and the river and trees and white-topped waggons quivered and blurred, they understood. Their eyes were looking upon one of those marvellous illusions of nature—a mirage. Many times while crossing the plains they had witnessed this wonderful phenomenon, but never before had one looked as real and natural as did this one, when their eyes first caught sight of it.

The disappointment of all was overwhelming when

they understood that what they were looking upon was only a picture in the air. The two women dropped on the ground where they stood and burst into tears, and there were tears in the eyes of even the men as they turned their faces away from the tempting scene, but upon no one did the illusion have such an astounding effect as upon Scoot.

"Watah! Watah! Golly, dar am watah!" he yelled the moment he caught sight of the blue river. "I's gwine to hab some ob dat watah mighty sudden. I's 'most bus-cated wid dryness. Watah! Watah!" and down the ridge he started as fast as his little black legs could take him, paying not the slightest heed to Mr. Judson's commands to come back, his eyes seeing only the blue waters of the river. Suddenly, when he was about half-way down the ridge, a quick shifting of the strata of air caused the river scene to vanish instantaneously, leaving nothing but the bare, sandy, rock-strewn desert in its place.

Scoot stopped stock-still, rubbed his eyes, stared, scratched his head, pinched one leg, then the other, stared, and then turning, came slowly back up the ridge, his eyes almost bulging out of his head.

"Whar am dat ribber an' dem trees an' waggins done gone?" he asked, marching straight up to Mr. Judson.

"There were no rivers nor trees nor waggons there, Scoot. 'Twas only a picture, a picture in the air," and Mr. Judson laid a hand sympathetically on the woolly head.

"No ribber, no trees, no waggins? Only ghosties! An' I done seed dem wid mah two eyes!—Golly! what am dat? Mo' ghosties?" and Scoot stood transfixed

with horror, one black finger pointing toward the pile of rocks that stood on the summit of the ridge a few rods to the right of the trail, and his bulging eyes staring at a faceless head that swayed back and forth beneath a broad-brimmed hat above one of the rocks.

For an instant Mr. Judson's heart almost stopped beating at the sight of that uncanny thing swaying back and forth above the rock, and then with an exclamation of horror he started on the run for the rocks, followed by Ray and Arthur and Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins, while the others watched the dread object with white, apprehensive faces.

"Jee-my'mee, it's a man's leg with a hat on the foot!" Ray exclaimed the moment he came near enough to have a clear view of the waving thing. "Who can it be? The—the Sinful Four!" and his face whitened.

Behind the rock lay three men, all huddled together, and apparently so weak they could not sit up, while their swollen lips and tongues and parched throats seemed unable to utter a sound. The leg of one of them, with his hat on the foot, had been the odd signal of distress that had given Scoot such a fright.

It needed but a glance to tell our friends that they were looking down on all that was left of the Sinful Four. Bud Wilkes lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily and apparently unconscious; Mike was mumbling incoherently to himself; Slim George alone seemed in his right senses, and it was his leg that had waved the signal of distress.

Mr. Judson looked at Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson, and Jud Jimpson and Tom Rawlins looked at Mr. Judson and at each other.

" I wouldn't leave a dog to die like that," Jud Jimpson said.

" 'Twouldn't be Christian," and the hard look went out of Tom Rawlins's eyes.

" Get the water," and Mr. Judson turned a bit sharply to Ray and Arthur. " We're not heathens yet. Bring the water and a cup, quick."

In three minutes Ray and Arthur were back with the water, a scant two gallons, but every drop they possessed, and there was not one of them whose throat and lips were not swollen and parched with thirst, and yet no one dissented when Mr. Judson took the water and knelt by the side of the thirst-stricken men and began pouring the precious fluid down their burning throats.

" I reckon we'd better get the tent up and camp here until the day grows cool," and Mr. Judson looked up to Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson. " Cat and I'll look after these fellows if you'll see to the camping."

" Sartain," responded Jud Jimpson. " 'Twill do th' critters good tew rest here a spell," and the two men hurried away to unyoke the oxen and pitch the tents, both knowing well that the oxen could go no farther and that their camping there was not a matter of choice, but of necessity.

Not ten minutes after they were unyoked two of the oxen were dead, and the others were so weak that they had fallen in their tracks and lay on the hot sand moaning and lowing in the greatest distress.

As soon as the tents were pitched the three men were carefully borne to one of them, and made as comfortable as possible under its shelter. All were conscious now, and fast regaining their strength, but it had taken

a gallon of the precious water to bring about this pleasing result, and now little more than a gallon remained —and there were seventeen thirsty throats to supply and the oxen had given out and no one knew when more water would be found.

"I calculate that ridge of rocks over yonder," and Jud Jimpson pointed to a rocky ridge some five miles distant, as the three men stood holding council together on the summit of the pile of rocks, "is th' divide atween God's land an' this tarnal desert, accordin' tew th' description of th' trail that old trapper in Salt Lake City gives me, an' if so it be, there's plenty of good water an' grass not more'n a couple of miles beyond. But," and his face lengthened, "them oxen can't make another rod without a good drink of water, an' th' women folks an' yunks are tew tuckered tew walk, an' th' hosses can't carry them all, an' thar's them skunks in that tent," and his lips tightened. "'Twouldn't be human tew leave them. So I reckon it's up tew sum on us tew take th' hosses an' water-bags an' git back with sum of that water as quick as th' Almighty will let us. Leastwise that's th' only thing I can see for us tew do."

There was no disputing the wisdom of Jud Jimpson's conclusion, and it was decided to act upon it immediately, for time was life now, when only a gallon of water stood between seventeen thirsty people and a frightful death. Accordingly, the six horses—it will be remembered that there were six horses still left—were made ready, and Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson (Tom Rawlins had been barred on account of his great weight) mounted two of them, and leading the others, set out with many cheering promises of a speedy return

with an abundance of water, toward the rocky ridge beyond which lay life or death for all of them.

It was now, perhaps, a couple of hours after sunrise, and the heat of the sun was beginning to be oppressive, but our friends did not seek the shelter of the tent and waggon until the little party slowly toiling across the desert had become a black spot in the distance, creeping nearer and nearer to the ridge of rocks, and finally had vanished from sight.

"Better get under the shelter of the tent and waggon," Tom Rawlins said, rising when even the black spot was no longer visible. "I'm going to have a look at that Sinful Trio again, and I reckon we'd all better have a swallow or two of water," and he strode away toward the tent in which the three men had been left.

The others took his advice and returned to the grateful shade of the tent, all except Ray and Arthur, who went with him to have a look at Slim George and his companions.

The three men apparently had hardly moved. They lay side by side on the sand, and judging from their looks and acts were as helpless as three babes. On the ground near them, but out of reach of their hands, stood a gallon jug that had been left, nearly filled with water, in the tent, for it was thought that the men were too weak to be able to get to it.

The moment Tom and the two boys entered the tent the three rascals began weakly begging for water and for something to eat, claiming that they had not had a mouthful of food for two days. If they recognised Tom Rawlins and the boys they showed no signs of doing so.

"We can get you something to eat, I reckon," Tom

Rawlins replied. "But water is a mighty scarce article with us just now, and we can't give you more'n a swallow or two at a time, not until Jud and Jed gets back. They've taken the horses and gone after water. You boys," and he turned to Ray and Arthur, "go and ask Mrs. Judson to fix up something for them to eat. I'll give them a swallow or two of water," and he picked up the jug to pour a little of the water into the cup that stood by its side, as Ray and Arthur hurried out of the tent for the food. "Hi-ho! I thought this jug was nearly full!" and he turned suspiciously to the three men, to find himself looking into the barrels of three revolvers levelled at his head.

"Hands up and not a yep, or we shoot to kill," Slim George said, smiling tauntingly. "This time I hold the right card, and I'm not going to discard it. Now, just tie those big arms and legs of his so they won't be getting into mischief, Bud. Mike and I'll see that he behaves himself," and the eyes above the pistol barrel gleamed significantly.

Tom Rawlins had been so completely taken by surprise that he was absolutely at the mercy of the three men, and it needed but a glance into their glinting eyes and cruel faces to tell him that they would not hesitate an instant to shoot if he gave them the slightest reason for doing so, consequently he did the only thing a sensible man could do—held up his hands and kept still.

Bud Wilkes at once lowered his revolver, picked up a long piece of rope that he had been sitting on, and in two minutes Tom Rawlins's arms and legs were so securely bound that even his great strength was helpless.

"Thought we were as weak as little babies, didn't you?" taunted Slim George during this trussing-up process. "Well, to tell you the truth, we had about given up all hopes and had laid down behind the rock to die like dogs, when we saw you coming up the ridge and laid our plans accordingly. Great scheme, wasn't it?" and he smiled exultingly. "You bit like a lot of suckers. Gave us plenty of water. That was what we needed most. Even left a jugful in the tent for us to help ourselves, and then stood like a lot of numb-skulls and watched two of your men ride away while we crept out of the tent and armed ourselves with your own guns, and even found a rope with which to tie you. Smart lot of fellows you are to let three unarmed men, so weak they could hardly stand, capture your whole outfit—women, kids, and all—aren't you?" and he chuckled vauntingly. "That's right. Stop up his mouth," and he nodded approvingly to Bud Wilkes, who had thrust a wad of cloth into the captured man's mouth and securely fastened it there. "We don't want none of his chin music."

"There, I calculate that'll even up matters a little bit betwixt us two," and Bud Wilkes gave his helpless captive a brutal kick, and glared vindictively down into his face; "and the job ain't finished yet, not by a jug-ful of misery. I'll——"

"Quick, th' kids are comin'!" softly called Mike from a slit in the tent, where he had been keeping a lookout for the two boys ever since his services were no longer needed in guarding Tom Rawlins.

Bud Wilkes clubbed his heavy revolver and quickly stepped to one side of the tent-opening; Slim George and Mike, with equal alacrity, stationed themselves on

the other side, their revolvers held ready to strike; and thus, hardly breathing, the three men awaited the coming of the two unsuspecting boys.

Ray was the first to push aside the tent-flap and entered bearing in his hand a large tin plate piled with cold beans, with a few slices of dried buffalo meat, and close behind him came Arthur, carrying a couple of loaves of bread. Ray took a step inside before he caught sight of Tom Rawlins, bound and gagged, stopped in utter amazement, and just as the yell of warning was parting his lips, the heavy butt of Bud Wilkes's revolver struck his head and he went down without uttering a sound, the plate of food falling from his hands. At the same instant Arthur, who was just entering the tent, was struck on the head by Slim George's revolver and fell unconscious, without even knowing what had struck him.

"I call this a slick job," Bud Wilkes said, grinning with satisfaction, as he assisted in binding and gagging the two unconscious boys. "Now for the women folks and the little kids, and then for that twenty-five thousand dollars that we've been so long waiting for," and his face flushed and his eyes began to glow covetously.

As soon as the two boys were securely bound and gagged, the three scoundrels, their revolvers in their hands, stepped boldly out of the tent. They had only women to deal with now, and they were not afraid. No one was in sight. All were sheltering themselves from the hot sun under the tent, except Scoot, who lay, like a watch-dog, curled up asleep under the waggon.

"Every last one of them corralled in that tent," Slim George said with a grin. "Bud, you just step to the tent-opening and poke in your revolver and hold

them there, while Mike and I go through the waggon for that money-chest."

"Sure and I'll hold them, tight as a vise. I'll just fire a shot over their heads to let them know I'm loaded and to see them squirm," and Bud Wilkes laughed. "But no monkey work about that money," and he scowled. "Remember we're to divvy even," and he strode away toward the tent where the women and the children lay all unsuspicious of trouble, and whence a pistol shot a few minutes later told how well he was keeping his word.

Slim George and Mike hurried to the waggon, and at once began an exciting search for the money, but so well had Mr. Judson concealed its hiding-place, that after they had apparently searched the waggon and everything it contained from top to bottom, they had not found a single dollar.

"Well, if I can't find the money I can knock their blamed old waggon into kindling wood," and Slim George, in a rage, picked up an axe that lay on the bottom of the waggon-box and struck a furious blow with it at the bottom of the box—as it chanced, directly over the secret receptacle.

The axe went through the board with a crash, and Slim George stared through the opening thus made for a moment, and then, with a yell of triumph, thrust both hands down into it and pulled out the money-chest.

"We've got it! We've got it!" yelled Mike, dancing wildly around Slim George, who had jumped from the waggon to the ground with the chest held tightly in his two hands.

"Hurrah!" and with a terrible threat that he would

kill the first one to stick a head out of the tent, Bud Wilkes deserted his post on the run, and in another minute the three men were squatted on the ground around the money-chest trying to open it, and so intently were their eyes fixed on the chest that not one of them saw the little black form of Scoot, who had been awakened by the crash of the axe through the boards above his head, crawl swiftly from under the waggon and dart away toward the tent where Ray and Arthur and Big Tom Rawlins lay tightly bound and gagged, and which had been placed some ten rods from the other tent and on the opposite side of the waggon from it.

"Get the axe and smash it in!" Bud Wilkes urged impatiently, after they had tried in vain for a couple of minutes to open the chest.

Mike quickly brought the axe, and with one blow burst open the cover, and all of Mr. Judson's wealth lay before them in glittering coins of gold.

The three scoundrels almost bumped their heads together in their eagerness to get their hands into the golden treasure, and for a few minutes could do nothing more than scoop the shining coins up in their hands and allow them to fall back into the chest through their fingers, while they listened entranced to the music of the chink-chink of the falling gold.

"Count it! Count it!" Bud Wilkes cried, almost delirious with excitement and greed. "I want my share now! I want to know how much it is! I want to feel it in my own hands! Count it!" and gathering up all the coins he could hold in his two hands, he began feverishly counting them, placing them in little piles of a hundred dollars each.



"Count it, Count it."

Slim George and Mike at once joined in the counting, and soon the sand around the chest was covered with little piles of gold coins.

"One thousand dollars!" almost yelled Bud, as he bunched ten of the little gold piles together.

"Two thousand!" and Slim George excitedly scooped up another handful of the coins.

And thus the counting went on with feverish excitement, until five thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand, twenty thousand dollars had been counted by the gold-mad men, and then, all of a sudden, the flushed face of Slim George turned ghastly white and his lower jaw dropped and his eyes stared wildly past the gold, straight in front of him, into the muzzles of Big Tom Rawlins's rifle and the rifles of Ray and Arthur, who stood not a dozen feet from the three scoundrels, their guns levelled at their heads.

"I reckon we'll finish that counting," Tom Rawlins said grimly. "Hands up! None of—" and the red flame leaped viciously from his rifle, and Bud Wilkes, with his half-drawn revolver in his hand, half jumped to his feet and fell over backward, a bullet through his head.

There was no need of repeating the lesson, and in three minutes more Slim George and Mike were securely bound.

Naturally, Ray and Arthur and Tom Rawlins had been tremendously surprised at the sight of the piles of gold spread out on the sand before the robbers, for it will be remembered they knew nothing of the treasure Mr. Judson's waggon held, but Mrs. Judson, who with the others had rushed out of the tent the moment they heard the rifle shot, soon solved the mystery,

and explained how Mr. Judson had concealed the gold in his waggon.

"Now that accounts for the way them skunks have been dodging our trail ever since we left Independence," and Tom Rawlins's face showed the relief he felt at having solved a troublesome mystery. "They were after that gold."

A grave was dug near the pile of rocks, and the body of Bud Wilkes, wrapped in a blanket, lowered into it and covered over and left, unmarked and unmourned, in that lonely desert. Slim George and Mike, strongly bound, were carried back to the tent, and to make sure that they did not cause any more trouble, either one of the boys or Tom Rawlins remained in the tent to keep an eye on them.

Fortunately, there was still a couple of quarts of water left in the jug, enough to give all a few swallows, but by noon every drop of this had been drunk, and our friends, with parched and swollen lips and tongues, were compelled to sit throughout the long hot afternoon waiting and hoping and praying for the speedy return of Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson with an abundance of water.

There is no more terrible suffering than that caused by extreme thirst on a hot desert. The lips swell and crack open, the tongue and throat become parched and swollen, the stomach burns as if it were a red-hot furnace, the skin grows dry and hot, the heart thumps and throbs painfully, the blood runs like molten fire through the veins, the skull feels like a hot boiler about to burst, and throughout the whole body comes a peculiarly appalling sensation of shrinking sinews and muscles and the drying of cracking bones, followed

swiftly by delirium and ending mercifully in coma and death.

Such were the fast-approaching horrors that now threatened our little party of emigrants unless speedily driven back by the arrival of water, and knowing this, each one of my readers can imagine how anxiously the eyes of all kept searching the stretch of rocks and sand beyond the ridge, hoping for a glimpse of the returning horsemen and horses laden with what to them meant life—water. And at last, just as the sun was sinking like a great ball of fire in the west, Ray, who had stationed himself on top of the pile of rocks, caught sight of a little black spot moving slowly over the desert—moving in their direction. For a few minutes he watched it, to make sure that his eyes were not deceiving him, his heart beating as if it would knock a hole through his ribs, watched it until he plainly saw that it was becoming larger and coming nearer, and then with a glad shout, "They are coming! We are saved! They are coming!" he came tumbling down the rocks as if his bones and flesh were made of steel and india-rubber.

An hour later, in the dusk of early night, Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson rode into camp, the water-bags and vessels, tied across their horses' backs, filled with water.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BILL AND LIS

JUD JIMPSON had been right in his interpretation of the old trapper's information. The desert ended with the rocky ridge, and not two miles beyond he and Mr. Judson had come to a little valley where they found an abundance of water and grass and the camps of two hunters who had just come from the gold mines, and of several parties of emigrants who were on their way to the mines.

Naturally, Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson were greatly enraged when they learned of the treachery and ingratitude of the three men, whose lives they had saved at so great a peril to their own, but there was no way of bringing the two remaining rascals to a fitting punishment in these uninhabited wilds, unless our friends took the matter in their own hands, and this they did not care to do. Accordingly, it was determined to leave them there alone on the desert, with a little food and a little water, but without weapons except their hunting-knives, warning them that, if they ever caught them where there were means of bringing them to justice, they would have them punished.

"But where is Scoot?" Mr. Judson inquired, when all these matters had been explained and determined upon, and everybody had drunk his fill of water.

"Where is the hero of the hour? This is the second time he has saved that gold, and I want to let him know that Jedidiah Judson is not the man to pass over such a thing unnoticed. Where's the little black tike gone to?" and his eyes vainly searched the group gathered around the water for the black face of Scoot.

"Oh, papa," and Mildred smiled until the dimples came back again into her cheeks, "didn't I tell you that Scoot would be lots of help to us? And he has, hasn't he?"

"You bet," was Mr. Judson's emphatic response. "He's been our little black angel. But where is the rascal? Scoot! Scoot!" he yelled, standing up and looking around.

"I's comin'. I's done comin' immejiate. Jes' wait till I done gits 'nother swaller," and, glancing in the direction of the voice, Mr. Judson saw Scoot a couple of rods away, his back against a rock, hugging a gallon jug of water tightly to his bosom.

Everybody laughed. It was easy to laugh now, with their stomachs full of water and the cooling, life-giving fluid rushing to all parts of their bodies, and Scoot, after taking another deep drink from the jug, struggled to his feet and, still clinging to the jug of precious water, staggered with his burden to where Mr. Judson stood.

"Golly, dat am de bestes watah dis niggah done ebber did drinked. I's 'mos' busticated, but I's jes' gotter hab 'nother swaller," and he again raised the jug to his lips.

"Great Scott, Scoot," and Mr. Judson caught hold of the jug and jerked it from the negro boy's hands,

" you'll bust if you don't let up on that water! You'll bust and blow all into little black pieces! "

" Golly, am dat so? " and Scoot placed both hands on his little distended stomach, while a look of fear jumped into his eyes. " She am mighty tight, 'deed she am," and the look of fear deepened. " I's gwine to bust! I can feel her done gettin' ready to bust! " he wailed, holding tight on his stomach with both hands, and then, catching sight of some ropes that had been used in carrying the water, his face brightened. " Dis niggah fix um," and grabbing up one of the ropes, he wound it several times tightly around his belly, and tied it firmly. " Dar, now I done can't bust! Gib me dat jug ob watah," and he held out his hands for the water.

" No, no, not any more now," and, laughing, Mr. Judson kept a firm hold on the jug. " Scoot," and his face sobered, " you little black rascal, you're worth your weight in gold," and Mr. Judson grabbed one of his black hands; " this is the second time you've saved that gold from being stolen, and Jed Judson won't forget it."

" And if it hadn't been for you, Scoot, I'm sure I'd been dead now," and Ray caught hold of his other hand and began shaking it with all his strength. " You're a black jewel, Scoot, that's what you are."

" You—you blessed boy! We all owe you much more than we can ever repay you," and Mrs. Judson threw her motherly arms around his little black body. " You've been our good angel, Scoot. May the good God reward you! "

And now the others all crowded around the astounded little negro boy and shook his hand, and tried

to tell how grateful they were to him for the part he had played in their rescue from the robbers.

Scoot's eyes rolled in the wildest astonishment from one face to another. Evidently he had only the faintest idea of what all these "going ons" were about, but he did remember what had been the result of other similar "going ons," and his face brightened.

"Does dis niggah done git 'nother big eat?" he asked, the grin on his face broadening until it almost reached from ear to ear.

Again everybody laughed, while Mr. Judson exclaimed heartily: "Bless you, yes! If we ever get to where there is civilised eating, you shall have the feast of your life, if I have to buy up all the victuals and cooks in town."

"Den dis niggah done hopes we comes to dat cibilised eatin' mighty soon," and Scoot grinned happily. A wish that was joined in most heartily by all the others.

Only two of the oxen were alive when Mr. Judson and Jud Jimpson reached camp with the water, but these two were saved, and by ten o'clock they had so far recovered their strength that it was determined to continue the journey that night as far as the little valley where the water had been obtained, which was only some seven or eight miles distant.

"I reckon we'll have to try yoking them two horses of yours, boys, along with the oxen," Mr. Judson said to Ray and Arthur, when everything was ready for the start. "Them oxen can't pull that waggon without help."

Accordingly, much to Getthere's and Black Duke's astonishment and disgust, a yoke was placed around

their necks and they were hitched to the waggon ahead of the oxen, and after a few minutes' vain protesting the two horses, like the wise animals they were, seemed to understand the situation, and settled down nobly to do the work before them.

Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins lingered behind the waggons for a few minutes to attend to the needs of the two robbers, Slim George and Mike, who lay on the ground still strongly bound and gagged.

First they placed by their sides a gallon jug full of water, a sufficient quantity of baked beans and dried meat and bread to last them three or four days, and a couple of hunting-knives. Then Mr. Judson wrote this warning on a piece of paper and tied it to the water-jug:

WARNING

DON'T FOLLOW US. IF WE CATCH YOU DODGING OUR TRAIL AGAIN, WE WILL SHOOT TO KILL. KEEP OUT OF OUR WAY. IF WE MEET WITH YOU ANY PLACE WHERE JUSTICE CAN BE ENFORCED, WE WILL HAVE YOU ARRESTED FOR ROBBERY. WE WILL WARN ALL EMIGRANTS WE MEET TO BE ON THEIR GUARD AGAINST YOU. QUIT LIVING LIKE DIRTY SKUNKS, AND BE MEN.

This done, they approached the two robbers in much the same manner they would have approached two loathsome beasts, and without touching them except with the points of their knives or uttering a word, they cut the ropes that held their hands, and leaving them to free themselves from the gags and the ropes that bound their feet, turned, still without uttering a word, and walked swiftly after the departing waggon. When they reached the waggon they glanced back. Standing

out on the ridge-top, clearly outlined in the brilliant moonlight, they saw Slim George and Mike. Both men were shaking their fists furiously at them, and doubtless calling down the direst anathemas, but our friends were now too far away to even hear their voices.

Some three hours later, after a long, weary tramp across the remaining stretch of desert and over the rocky ridge and through gullies, the little party of tired emigrants reached the valley, and with thankful hearts pitched their camp on the grass-covered banks of a clear stream of water, free at last from the perils of the desert, and soon every one except the guard was sound asleep.

There were a large number of emigrants encamped in the valley, resting themselves and animals after their arduous journey across the desert, and from them our friends learned the next day that they had followed, for the greater distance, an old trail across the desert that had been recently abandoned for another route, longer but with grass and water at intervals of every thirty miles or so. This explained how it was that they had travelled so many miles without seeing a fellow emigrant, when there was hardly a stretch of a mile on the whole trail from Independence to California over which the waggons of an emigrant train were not creaking during some hour of the day.

The little valley was filled with rumours of the gold mines, fed by tales told by the two hunters who had so recently come from California, and other stories that somehow had filtered across the intervening mountain range, and everybody was greatly excited and anxious to get to the mines as speedily as possible. Consequently, the delay of three days which the Judson

party found it necessary to make here in order to recruit their horses and oxen was exceedingly trying to all, and especially to Ray and Arthur, who now felt as if they were almost in sight of the long-looked-for golden Eldorado of their dreams. But the delay proved to be not without its advantages, for before the end of the three days Mr. Judson's persuasive tongue and gold had convinced the two hunters that it would be for their best interest to guide our party across the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the mines through a pass only known to them and the Indians, which they declared would make the journey several days shorter and be much easier on their oxen and horses than the usual emigrant route.

Accordingly, the third night, Liscomb Davis, Lis for short, and Bill Cree, the two hunters, moved over to the Judson camp, to be ready for the start bright and early the next morning.

That was a famous night for the children. Lis and Bill, as the two hunters preferred to be called, were both old " mountain men," and had hunted and trapped for years all through that region, and were chuck-full of stories of their adventures with wild beasts and Indians; but most interesting of all, they had come direct from the gold mines themselves, had actually seen the gold with their own eyes, had even picked it out of the sand and gravel with their own hands, and had some of it at that very moment in their own pockets! And Ray and Arthur could hardly contain their excitement when each thrust a hand in his pocket, pulled out a small buckskin bag and, opening it, poured out on the palm of his hand a little pile of the gold-dust of which they had heard so much, but never had seen before.

" Me 'nd Bill dug this out of th' river-gravel in two days," Lis explained. " I reckon thar's 'bout a hundred dollars in each pile. One feller alongside of us cleaned up a thousand dollars in th' same time, an' another farther up th' river took out ten thousand dollars in five days, while two men jest below us didn't clean up enough to buy their grub."

" But why did you come away? " broke in Arthur excitedly. " Why did you come away, when you could pick up gold like that? " and his eyes looked in astonishment from the faces of the two hunters to the little piles of gold on the palms of their hands.

" Wall, I reckon me 'nd Bill won't cut out for gold-diggers," the old hunter replied, shaking his head. " We've lived tew free an' easy tew be bound down tew a pick an' shovel, a-slingin' gravel, an' a-gettin' backaches an' armaches an' legaches an' rumatics an' th' Lord only knows what else, an' all for little specks of yeller stuff, some on 'em not bigger'n pinheads. Besides, me 'nd Bill ain't needin' no gold. Ain't we got our rifles, an' God's great country full of wild critters tew use 'em in? An' what more can any sensible man, who knows th' feel of a good rifle, ask? Gold! Let 'em that wants tew dig in th' dirt for th' yeller stuff, me 'nd Bill's goin' tew roam free an' easy an' inderpendent. Not but what minin's all right for 'em that don't know th' virtues of a good rifle," he added apologetically, " but no more gravel scratchin' for me 'nd Bill."

" Please, please, may I hold some of the gold in my own hand? " and Mildred, who with shining eyes and flushed face had been waiting an opening to prefer her request, held out one of her hands.

" Sure," and with a good-natured laugh the hunter

dumped the little pile of shining gold-dust on Mildred's extended palm. " 'Tain't much tew look at."

Ray and Arthur and Sally and Scoot at once crowded around Mildred, and all had to feel of the precious gold with their own fingers and to heft it in their own hands.

" Am dat de gold like what we's gwine to dig up like 'taters in dat Cal'fornee? " Scoot asked, when at last the yellow grains lay on his black palm.

" Yes, yes," Ray answered, laughing. " That's the real stuff, Scoot, just as it is picked up from the ground."

" Den dem Cal'fornee 'taters mighty small no 'count 'taters," and Scoot's face showed his disgust. " We done growed bigger peas dan dem in old Kentuck."

" But think, Scoot, that little pile of gold you hold in your hand is worth a hundred dollars! "

" Golly, am she? " and Scoot stared at the gold. " Hundred dollars! More'n 'nuff to buy two cows in old Kentuck! Den dis niggah's gwine to scratch grabbel mighty lively when he done gits to dat Cal'fornee! "

When all had felt and hefted and examined the gold-dust, it was returned to the hunter, and for an hour longer the circle around that glowing camp-fire in that lonely little valley sat and listened eagerly while the two old hunters told of their brief experiences in the rough mining camps, where fortunes were found and lost in a day, and where men were wildly sacrificing health and all the comforts of life in their mad search for gold.

" My, but if we should strike it rich and make our pile, wouldn't we be the happy boys? " Arthur confided to Ray, as he rolled himself up in his blanket to go to

sleep. "I think it would take about a hundred thousand dollars to satisfy me!" and he drew in his breath at the thought of the magnitude of that vast sum and of his boldness in daring even to hope that he might become the possessor of so great wealth.

"Well, you're not a bit hoggish, are you, Art?" and Ray laughed. "Now, I'm not going to be satisfied with no skimpy hundred thousand dollars. I'm not going to quit until I get a hundred million dollars! Then what'll your skimpy hundred thousand look like by the side of my pile?" and Ray nudged Arthur in the ribs. "But, honest, now, I would like to find about twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of gold. You see——"

"Silence in the ranks," called Mr. Judson. "This is sleeping-time, not talking-time."

"All right," laughed Ray, and the two boys shut their mouths and eyes, and in five minutes were sound asleep and doubtless dreaming of shovelling gold-dust into great buckskin bags, much as they had shovelled wheat into grain bags back on old Thompson's farm in far-off Ohio.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE SHOWER OF ARROWS

BEFORE sunup the next morning our friends were moving out of the little valley under the guidance of the two hunters. All were in splendid spirits. The dangers and hardships and sufferings of the past were forgotten in the thought that now they were nearing the end of their long journey, that now they were almost within sight of the Promised Land.

Ray and Arthur walked by the side of Mildred, who was again on Beauty, their own horses being still needed to help the oxen pull the waggon, and as they walked they talked and joked merrily and planned what they would do when they reached the mines and found the gold, building many of those delightful air-castles so dear to every youthful heart, and which rise, beautiful and stately, only at the touch of the magic wand of youth.

The route passed out of the little valley through a rock-ribbed gully, and thence for many miles along the dry bed of a mountain stream, from which it turned aside toward the middle of the afternoon to cross over a low-lying ridge that separated it from the valley beyond. When the top of this ridge was reached, the two hunters, who led the way, paused and, stretching out their hands, pointed across the valley to where in

the far distance the rugged sides and lofty peaks of great mountains rose in the purple-blue of the western horizon.

"Them's th' Sierra Nevada Mountains," and Lis's hand swept the western horizon, "an' beyond 'em is th' Land of Gold, where thousands of men are a-breakin' their backs an' a-ruinin' their health a-tryin' tew git a fortune sudden an' easy. Blamed if I can see the sense on it, when rifles are so cheap an' wild critters so plenty," and he shook his grizzled head as if this phase of human nature was altogether beyond his comprehension.

Our friends were too far away to see more than the big outlines of these grand mountains, but even thus they were a beautiful and an impressive sight. Their loftiest peaks were white with snow, and below them rose great shoulders of massive rocks, broken and rent by shadowy ravines and dark canyons, their huge bodies belted with the purplish blue of the heavy pine forests that clothed their sides above the pale green of the skirts of the foot-hills.

"Them's 'bout as high as they make mountains, I reckon," Bill said, gazing proudly at the distant snow-capped peaks. "An' I'd a sight rather be a wanderin' around in 'em free an' easy, with my rifle on my shoulder, than a-diggin' for that tarnal gold with a shovel in my hands an' an ache in my back. Blamed if I can see where the fun comes in," and he, too, shook his head.

"Takes all kinds of people to make the world," Arthur laughed, "and if some didn't dig for gold, why we wouldn't have any gold for money or jewelry. Will we get to those mountains to-night?"

"Will we git tew them mountains to-night?" and Lis chuckled. "Not unless them oxen an' hosses of yourn sprout wings an' fly. Why, them mountains 's more'n forty miles from here. But when we gits thar, me 'nd Bill knows a pass through 'em that'll land you in th' gold mines 'most afore you know it."

The trail followed by the two hunters was evidently well-known and frequently used by the Indians, for every few miles they passed "Injun signs," as the hunters called them, old camp-fires and other indications of the coming and going of their red brothers, but Bill and Lis assured them that they were in no personal danger from the savages.

"Of course, if you gives 'em th' chance, bein' Injuns, they's bound tew steal your critters," Bill explained. "Hoss-stealin' ain't stealin' tew Injuns. It's jest takin' what belongs tew you if you can git it without gittin' cotched. But most on th' Injuns hereabouts is Diggers, an' they ain't got gump 'nuf tew fight anything bigger'n rabbits."

In one of the valleys they came upon a camp of these Indians, and after the boys had seen them and the way they lived, they understood quite well why it was that the two old hunters held them in such utter contempt. They were by far the most ignorant, degraded, and filthy of all the Indians they had seen, with low, flat foreheads, brutish dull faces, and pot-bellied bodies. They wore little clothing, and did not appear to know enough even to make suitable wigwams to protect themselves from the weather, but lived like wild animals in caves and burrows and in rude shelters made of the branches of trees. They ate roots, seeds, acorns, frogs, snakes, lizards, grasshoppers, bugs—anything,

however revolting in appearance, they could get into their mouths and down into their stomachs.

"They're the disgustingest, dirtiest, homeliest, ugliest things I ever saw," was Mildred's way of expressing her opinion of these Indians after about a dozen of them had made our little party of emigrants a visit as they passed through the valley, and had tried to beg everything that they could not get their hands on to steal, until at last our friends had been forced to drive them away and to keep them at a distance, which had made them angry, and they had followed after the waggon for a long time, making ugly threats and shouting foul names.

"We must keep a mighty close watch on th' critters to-night when we camp," Bill warned, when the last of these Indians had been left in the distance. "Like as not them Diggers will follow us an' try tew git sum of th' hosses or oxen. I've knowed th' skunks tew creep up in th' darkness an' shoot a hoss, jest tew git th' carcuss they knowed would have tew be left th' next day. They ain't no use for any kind of a critter, except tew eat 'em, an' while they ain't got no guns they can shoot them arrows straight as rifle balls."

Accordingly, when night came and the camp was pitched, the horses and oxen were herded together in a bunch, tightly hobbled, and a double guard placed over them. During the fore part of the night a clear sky and a bright moon made it impossible for anything to get near the animals without being seen, but along toward morning the sky clouded over and it became quite dark. This happened a few minutes after Arthur, together with the two hunters, had gone on guard. The camp stood on the summit of a small hill covered

with short grass, with here and there a clump of bushes. The two tents and the waggon had been so placed as to form the points of a triangle with sides some two rods long. Inside the enclosure thus made were the oxen and the horses, while the women folks and the men folks slept in the two tents. The three guards stood at the points of the triangle, so that the entire camp was constantly under their eyes. Arthur's post was near the tent in which the men slept, and in front of which glowed a small camp-fire.

"Put out that camp-fire!" Bill called to Arthur from his post, as soon as it became too dark to see even for a couple of rods. "Now's th' time them Diggers 'll be gittin' in their work, if ever, an' that fire 'll give 'em jest 'nuff light tew shoot by."

Arthur hurried to the fire, caught up a pail of water, and threw the water on the glowing coals; and even as the water struck the fire and the light went out in a cloud of smoke and steam, an arrow hit the pail in his hands, another whistled by close to his ears, and a sharp cry of pain came from the tent where the men lay, almost instantly followed by the loud reports of the rifles of the two hunters, and the cries of Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson as they rushed out of the tent, their rifles in their hands.

"Where? Where? In what direction?" and the excited men glanced anxiously around.

For answer Arthur threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired toward the spot where he knew there was a thick clump of bushes.

A cry of pain followed the shot, and almost instantly the three rifles of Mr. Judson and Tom Rawlins and Jud Jimpson were discharged in the same

direction, but not another sound was heard nor was there another arrow shot. The Indians had vanished as silently as they had come.

"Where's Ray?" Arthur asked a few minutes later when the excitement had quieted down a little. "I thought I heard him cry out, as if hurt, just after the arrow struck the pail. He—he isn't here!" and he rushed madly into the tent calling, "Ray! Ray!" A moment later he uttered a sharp cry of anguish and called excitedly: "He's shot! He's dead! Somebody bring a light, quick!"

When the light was brought, Ray was seen lying on his back near the middle of the tent unconscious, with an arrow protruding from his left shoulder.

In a moment Mrs. Judson, Mr. Judson, and Tom Rawlins were kneeling by his side. With a hand as gentle as a woman's Tom Rawlins carefully drew out the arrow and cut open the clothing over the wound. The arrow had struck just below the shoulder-blade, but had not penetrated deeply, and the wound, while exceedingly painful, was not at all dangerous.

"He's only fainted from the shock and the pain. Get some water, Art, and we'll have his senses back in a jiffy," and Mr. Judson turned a face almost joyous in its relief to Arthur, who dashed away at once after the water.

Tom Rawlins, in cutting open the clothing, had laid bare Ray's bosom, and his eyes had caught the glitter of the jewelled ring that hung from the boy's neck. For a moment he stared at the ring, and then, with a flushed face he caught it up quickly and examined it eagerly. Presently he laid down the ring and looked curiously into Ray's face, but he said nothing, and

when Arthur came back with the water he arose and hurried out of the tent. "To make sure that none of them pesky Diggers are hanging about," he said.

A dash of water into Ray's face at once restored him to consciousness, and in a few minutes the skilful hands of Mr. and Mrs. Judson had washed and bound up his wound, and everybody was assured that his hurt, while it would disable him for a few days, was not in the least dangerous.

In the meantime the two hunters and Jud Jimpson had searched the region round about the camp in vain for the cowardly "Diggers." They had all disappeared, and nothing more was seen or heard of them.

One of the horses was found so badly hurt by an arrow that they were obliged to kill him, and both Getthere and Black Duke were slightly wounded, but otherwise the Indians had done no harm.

In the morning Arthur examined the clump of bushes toward which he had shot, and found there a little pool of dried blood, which told him that his ball had at least hit one of the "Diggers," but whether mortally or not he could not tell.

"Well, it evens up things a bit with the rascals, anyway," he declared. "And I'm glad I don't know whether or not I killed one of them. It isn't pleasant to know you have killed a human being, even if it is a Digger Indian."

A bed was made in the waggon for Ray, who was getting on splendidly, where he was made as comfortable as possible, and our friends were again on their way by sunrise.

That afternoon they reached the Sierras, and at night camped at the entrance to a deep canyon, which

the two hunters declared was the hallway to the pass that would carry them safely across the dreaded mountains and land them almost at the door of the mining region.

Tom Rawlins had been unusually silent and preoccupied during the day, and after the camp had been pitched he called Mr. Judson one side and asked him to tell him what he knew of Ray's childhood and parentage. Mr. Judson could give him little information, only what Ray had told him that he had been brought up in a poorhouse and that his father was dead, and so far as he knew he had no mother living.

"What is the trouble, Tom?" Mr. Judson inquired, with the kindly curiosity and freedom of good comradeship, when he had given him all the information he could about Ray.

"I don't think I had better tell you just yet, Jed," Tom Rawlins answered slowly, "not until I've had a talk with the boy. You see I am not exactly certain about the matter myself yet, and I want to be sure before—" and he hesitated. "Well, the boy is a bully fellow, and I must have a talk with him before I can say anything more, even to you; and I can't talk with him now until his wound is better, so we will drop the subject for the present and return to the camp-fire," and he led the way back to where Jud Jimpson and the two hunters sat around a blazing camp-fire.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

AT THE DEVIL'S SLIDE

THE next morning Ray was feverish and still obliged to lie on his bed in the waggon, but Mildred sat by his side, and her bright eyes saw and her quick tongue described to the invalid the most interesting scenes passed as they entered in the early morning's light the cool shadows of the canyon and slowly wended their way along its rocky bottom.

On both sides the canyon rose in walls of solid rock hundreds of feet high. The bottom in places was not over twenty feet wide, and was often covered so thickly with water-worn rocks that at times the larger of these had to be pushed or rolled aside before the waggon could pass. On each side the walls of the canyon were worn almost as smooth as glass to a height of twenty or more feet, evidently by the action of water rushing through the narrow passage with tremendous velocity.

Mr. Judson observed these evidences of the power of the floods that sometimes swept through the canyon with an ever increasing apprehension. What if a sudden downpour of rain in the mountains should again send a torrent of water boiling over the rocky bottom? The smooth, almost perpendicular walls of the canyon offered no refuge. They would be caught like drowning rats in a hole and instantly destroyed. He

glanced anxiously toward the skies above. Only a narrow ribbon of blue was visible. There was no way of even telling whether or not such a storm was brewing.

"How long is this canyon?" and he turned solicitously to the two hunters.

"'Bout twenty miles," answered Bill. "It cuts out more'n a hundred miles of th' roughest kind of trailin', goin' by th' old route, an' lands us within fifty miles of th' minin' regions. But 'tain't safe for critters an' waggins, only when one's mighty sartain there ain't goin' to be any heavy rains in th' mountains. You see, when thar's a big rain in th' mountains th' water comes a-tumblin' an' boilin'——"

"But how do you know there is no big rain due now?" Mr. Judson interrupted anxiously. "And why didn't you tell us about the dangers of this canyon when we were talking over the route with you?" and his eyes began to glint angrily. "We've got women and little children to look out for."

"Well," Lis replied slowly, taking no notice of Mr. Judson's anger, "me 'nd Bill's been livin' in these mountains off an' on now for nigh an even dozen years, an' we've never knowed it tew rain yet durin' th' wanin' of th' moon in October, have we, Bill?"

"Not a-once," Bill responded promptly.

"So we calculates there ain't no rain due," continued Lis, "bein' this is October an' th' moon on th' wane, an' we'll be out of th' canyon afore night, anyhow, an' where no freshet can git us, an' 'most within sight of th' gold mines, an' so I calculates there ain't no need of nobody worrin," and with these explanations Mr. Judson had to be content, but it was evident that he did not put as much confidence in the waning moon as the

two hunters did, for he was constantly urging the oxen and horses to greater speed, and would allow only a half-hour nooning instead of the usual hour.

The result soon justified his haste and anxiety, for about three o'clock in the afternoon, when they were nearing the end of the canyon, all were startled by the low rumble of distant thunder, followed in a few minutes by louder and nearer peals that shook, with their dreadful warnings, every heart, for all only too clearly understood their peril, should they be caught by a mountain freshet in the canyon.

"How much farther have we got to go before we can get out of here?" Mr. Judson inquired anxiously.

"Not more'n a couple of miles," Bill replied, his eyes scanning apprehensively the long ribbon of blue above his head. "I reckon you'd better jest poke up them critters a bit," and he turned to Jud Jimpson, who was driving.

Every one, even the animals, seemed aware of their danger, and now hurried forward at utmost speed. And there was need, for every minute the thunder was sounding louder and nearer and the canyon growing darker, and an inky blackness was rapidly creeping up the blue ribbon. Soon the darkness became so great that it was with difficulty they could see their way, but fortunately the bottom of the canyon now became smoother and the rocks and stones fewer, and on they hurried, the oxen and horses almost on the gallop.

A few big drops of rain splashed down into the canyon, a cool gust of wind rushed furiously between its rocky walls, and then for a minute or two no rain fell and no wind blew, while the darkness grew apace.

"The water is beginning to flow along the bottom

of the canyon!" called Arthur. "I can feel it beating against my feet."

"Hurry! Hurry!" shouted Mr. Judson, his eyes searching the sides of the canyon for some place of refuge. "Hurry! Hurry!" and he rushed to the sides of the oxen and horses and began prodding them with the muzzle of his rifle.

Now with a roar the rain poured down into the canyon in a torrent of great drops, the wind whistled shrilly by their ears, the thunders boomed directly over their heads, and the water raced furiously by their feet, gathering strength and depth each moment. In five minutes it was up to their ankles, in ten minutes it was swirling around their knees, and then, above the sound of the falling rain and the rush of the whistling wind, came the roar of the down-coming flood, and away up the canyon appeared a wall of black, topped with white, falling swiftly toward them.

"Quick! Cut the hosses an' oxen free from th' waggin!" shouted Bill, drawing his hunting-knife and leaping to the rope with which Getthere and Black Duke were hitched to the end of the waggon-tongue.

"Grab what you can out of th' waggin, an' follow me!" cried Lis, seizing a blanket from the waggon and a chunk of dried meat and leaping toward a dark opening that showed a little ahead in the right wall of the canyon. "We've got tew th' Devil's Slide jest in time to save our necks."

Mr. Judson seized his money-chest, caught Mildred in his arms, and with Mrs. Judson clinging to his elbow, sprang for the opening.

Big Tom Rawlins threw his great arms around Ray, bedding and all, and bore him through the rushing

water after Mr. Judson. In two minutes he felt the ground ascending beneath his feet, and in another minute he was mounting the gully torn through the wall of the canyon by the Devil's Slide, and in five minutes more he stood with his burden safe above the roaring flood below on the flat bottom of the Devil's Slide.

"Is everybody safe? Oh, is everybody safe?" gasped Mrs. Judson, glancing around the little assemblage anxiously the moment they paused on reaching a point of safety.

"Safe here!" shouted Jud Jimpson joyously. "Wife an' yunks an' all!"

"Thank God! Thank God, we are all safe!" and Mrs. Judson fell sobbing into her husband's arms.

"Scoot! Where's Scoot?" and Mildred looked wildly around. "I can't see Scoot! Oh, he's drowned! He's drowned!"

"'Deed I's not!" and Scoot, still very shaky in his legs but otherwise sound, slid off the back of Beauty and stood, grinning with joy, in front of Mildred. "I done sabed yo' lil pony," and he straightened up and glanced proudly at Beauty.

Getthere and Black Duke had also managed to scramble to safety up the Devil's Slide, but the other two horses and the oxen and the waggon were gone, and with them had gone everything they possessed in the world except what they had on their backs or held in their hands.

"Thank God! Thank God, we are all safe! The rest does not matter," and Mrs. Judson drew Mildred close to her and kissed her, and then kissed her husband, to his evident embarrassment.

" There, there, Cat," he said, gently pulling her arms from about his neck. " We've all got a lot to be thankful for to come out of that alive! " and he glanced shudderingly down the Devil's Slide to where a flood of water twenty or more feet deep was now rushing through the canyon. " And I'm too glad that we all escaped with our skins on to do any mourning for what's gone. I reckon something went wrong with your waning moon," and he turned with a smile to the two hunters.

" Me 'nd Bill ain't trustin' in no moon any more," Lis answered, fingering his rifle awkwardly. " An' we both asks your pardon for a-gettin' you intew all this trouble, an' tew show we're a-meanin' of what we say, we gives you our services as guides an' refuses tew take any pay."

" Oh, we'll stick to our bargain," Mr. Judson said, laughing. " I'm sure you didn't do it on purpose, since you risked your own necks as well as ours. But now we'll be thankful if you'll take us to a place where we can camp for the night and dry our clothes and get our scattered wits together."

" Sartain. Me 'nd Bill 'll have you all dry as tinder in less 'n an hour, an' a roof over your heads," and he grinned. " But what we says 'bout pay goes. Now for th' camp."

Ray declared himself able to ride, and was lifted onto the back of Getthere, Mrs. Jimpson and the baby were mounted on Beauty, the few things that were saved from the waggon were packed on Black Duke, and our friends set out up the Devil's Slide after the two hunters.

At the top of the Slide, which was but a steep gully

worn through the side of the canyon, they found themselves, to their surprise, standing on the borders of a pleasant grass-covered and wooded mountain valley, and near the mouth of a large cave which ran back into the rocks for a distance of thirty or more feet.

"There's your house," and Bill pointed to the cave. "Jest walk right in an' make yourselves tew home, while me an' Lis hustles sum wood for a fire," and he hurried off toward a little grove of trees a few rods away, followed by Lis.

The cave proved to be dry, with a clean, sandy bottom, and afforded a welcome shelter from the rain, which was still falling.

In less than the allotted hour the two hunters had a great fire roaring in the cavern, and everybody was standing around it drying their steaming clothes, the only thing they could do, since they had no other clothes to put on in their place should they take those they had on off—that is, everybody was except Ray, who lay on the little pile of bedding that had been saved with him as near the fire as comfort would permit, apparently none the worse for his exciting experience.

"Well, let's take stock and see where we stand," Mr. Judson said when the warmth of the fire had dried some of the dampness out of their clothes and the chill out of their bodies. "I reckon we won't be none overloaded with baggage," a fact that the stock-taking made only too evident.

Lis had saved a blanket and a chunk of dried meat, Tom Rawlins had borne away with Ray the four blankets he had been lying upon, Mr. Judson had saved his money-chest, all their guns and a few rounds of ammunition, and the three horses of the children had been

saved, and that was all that was left of the three well-loaded waggons and splendid yokes of oxen with which they had started from Independence so many weary weeks ago!

"Good!" Mr. Judson laughed, after the stock-taking. "We've plenty left to take us to the mines in fine shape. But what do we eat?" and he glanced a bit dubiously at the lone chunk of dried meat that lay on the sand near the fire.

"And what do we eat it on?" and Mrs. Judson looked helplessly around the circle of faces. "We haven't got a blessed dish left to cook or eat a blessed thing in."

"Reckon it's up tew me 'nd Bill tew rustle for th' grub," and Lis stroked the butt of his rifle affectionately. "An' as for dishes, me 'nd Bill has got sum up our sleeves," and he smiled. "So-long. We's goin' out tew git our suppers."

In less than half an hour the two hunters were back, bringing with them an antelope and a couple of partridges, which they threw down on the sand in front of the fire.

"Thar's eatin' fit for a king," Lis said, as he leaned his rifle up against the side of the cave. "Now, if you women folks 'll git th' birds ready for th' spit, me 'nd Bill 'll 'tend tew th' deer-meat."

In a remarkably short time the choicest parts of the antelope and the two birds were broiling, spitted Indian fashion, around the fire. That is, each piece of meat was thrust on the sharpened end of a stick about twenty inches long, the other end of the stick pushed into the sand at the proper distance from the fire and inclined toward the glowing coals in such a way as to

expose the meat to the heat and to protect the stick. By keeping careful watch and occasionally turning the spit, so as to expose all parts equally to the heat, the meat was soon broiled in a manner that, as Lis said, would have graced the table of a king.

"Now, I reckon it's up tew me 'nd Bill tew furnish th' plates," and grinning, Lis and Bill again stole out of the cave, to return in a few minutes with long, wide strips of birch bark, which they deftly cut into squares and then rounded into "plates" with their hunting-knives, and tossed one to each of the interested group.

"Thar you be! Now fall in an' do your cooks credit," and Bill seized one of the chunks of meat and shoved it off onto his bark plate with his hunting-knife, and all the others did likewise.

It was a merry feast. Every one said something amusing or did something funny, and everybody laughed freely and joyously, as if being stranded in a wilderness was one of the most delightful and pleasant things that could happen to a party of people. And when the darkness of night came the three horses, that had been feeding on the rich grass outside, were brought into the cave and securely tied to stakes driven in the sand, and then all gathered around the blazing camp-fire and sat and talked until weariness and sleep warned them that it was time to seek their beds—the pleasantly warmed sand around the glowing camp-fire.

Arthur lay for a long time, his eyes wide open, fascinated by the oddness of the scene and the strangeness of the situation, watching the ruddy firelight playing along the walls and roof of the cave and over the sleeping forms of his companions, and listening to the

mysterious sounds of the night and the wilderness, and wondering at the singularity of the fate that had brought him and his comrades through so many dangers to this lonely cave in the wild mountains of the far West. Presently, just as his eyes were beginning to grow heavy with sleep, he saw Tom Rawlins raise himself up softly from the sand and steal quietly over to where Ray lay sound asleep and stand silently gazing down on the boy's face, a look of sorrow in his eyes. He watched him, dreamily wondering what it meant, for a few minutes, and then his heavy eyelids closed, and he, too, was sound asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THE LAND OF GOLD

IT was now nearing the end of October, and the nights in the mountains were freezing cold, but in the cave, heated by the fire, our friends slept warm and comfortable, and by sunrise the next morning were wending their way across the little valley toward the gold mines, now so near that they hoped to reach them before the sun of another day should set.

Ray had improved wonderfully during the night, and now sat on the back of Getthere without much difficulty or pain. He had even declared that he was better able to walk than was Mrs. Judson, and had insisted on her mounting Getthere in his place, until Mr. Judson had threatened to tie him on the horse's back if he did not stay on until he gave him permission to get off.

The two hunters were on familiar ground and moved forward swiftly, appearing to know exactly where the easiest roads down the mountain-sides lay. Our friends followed, almost jubilantly, so near did they feel to their journey's end, and so rejoiced were they to find themselves again in "God's Country," as Mr. Judson called it. There were no more treeless, barren plains, no more sandy deserts, no more alkali dust, no more salty or poisonous water, no more sage-brush. But gigantic pines and other great trees clothed the mountain-sides,

and sparkling streams of ice-cold water sang their way down to the rivers below, and the valleys were soft with knee-deep grass, and even the rocks themselves were covered with verdure, while all about them moved the wild inhabitants of this delightful region.

Deer, antelope, mountain sheep, and elk were frequently seen, and once a startled moose sprang up from a nearby thicket and went crashing through the underbrush and disappeared before even the quick eyes of the hunters could get a shot at him. There was no need to go from the trail to hunt for game, upon which they now depended for their food. All they had to do was to choose and shoot and cook, and their breakfast or dinner or supper was ready.

Here Arthur shot his first deer and Ray killed a mountain sheep without dismounting from the back of Getthere, and not half an hour later shot a black-tailed deer, whose fatal curiosity had caused him to pause for an instant within range of his rifle.

Bears were also seen, some of them grizzlies, while wolves, lynxes, wildcats, and the lesser beasts of the mountains and forests were sighted almost every hour of the day, but none of these animals were killed except a small black bear, shot by Arthur, and four or five wildcats that seemed disposed to dispute their passage. They had no ammunition to waste, besides it did not seem sportsmanlike to kill even these animals just for the sake of the killing.

They saw no Indians, although they frequently came to places where Indians had camped, and of course, being far from the usual emigrant route, had no fellow travellers. They were alone in the midst of a virgin wilderness of surpassing beauty and grandeur, where

human feet, save those of the Indian and the lone white hunter and trapper, had never trod, where the country, as Jud Jimpson said, "was jest as God made it."

"I'd be almost willing to stop here and never go on to the gold mines," Ray declared to Arthur, who was walking along by his side, near the close of the second day after the disaster at the Devil's Slide, as our party entered one of those delightful little mountain valleys that nestle so picturesquely along the western slope of the Sierras. "It's the most beautiful country I ever saw," and his charmed eyes roamed over the little grass-covered, flower-adorned valley, where, in the distance, a number of deers and antelopes were peacefully grazing on the banks of a small river, to the forest-clothed mountains that enclosed it like a giant frame. "Wouldn't it be great if we could spend a week hunting here?"

"Yes," Arthur answered, his eyes sparkling. "But there is no use of thinking of such a thing; besides, we haven't enough ammunition to last us a day, and—and I am really too anxious to get to the mines and have a try for some of that gold to stop anywhere. Just think, it has been nearly four months since we left Independence! Four months, and we haven't once been under the shelter of the roof of a house or slept in a regular bed or ate at a table in all that time! Seems like years since that day we were hoeing corn in old farmer Thompson's cornfield, don't it? I wonder if Thompson has quit wondering what has become of us yet," and Arthur laughed. "Hello, I'll bet we're going to camp here!" and he glanced toward Bill and Lis, who had stopped on the banks of the little river near a grove of trees. "That don't look much like reaching the gold

mines to-night, and Bill and Lis said that we might," and his face showed his disappointment.

Arthur was right. The two hunters had decided that it would be wise to spend the night there in that delightful valley, promising the disappointed boys that they would be in the mining camps along the American River before noon the next day.

"Th' gold-diggin's are jest over beyond them rocks," and Lis pointed to the rocky ridge that enclosed the valley on the west, "'bout four or five hours' tramp from here, tew far tew git there tew-night, but we'll fetch 'em all right afore noon tew-morrer."

"To-morrow! To-morrow! The gold mines to-morrow, and then—" Arthur hesitated.

"And then we'll all be digging gold, digging gold, digging gold," sang Mildred. "We'll all be digging gold to-morrow. Oh, see, they're going to make a brush house for us to sleep in! Come on, let's help," and away she ran to where the men were already cutting poles and brush with which to build a shelter for the women and children from the dampness and cold of the night.

The five men worked rapidly, and in an hour the brush house was completed, with a slanting roof thatched with long grass and bound down by poles, and with sides of interwoven brush and grass, impervious alike to wind and rain. A half of one side of the house was left open, and in front of this a huge camp-fire was built. No need of being saving of fuel now, with millions of acres of trees all around them!

After supper Tom Rawlins approached Ray, and in a voice so low that none of the others heard, asked the boy to take a short walk with him along the banks of

the river, where they would be alone, as there was a private matter that he wished to talk over with him.

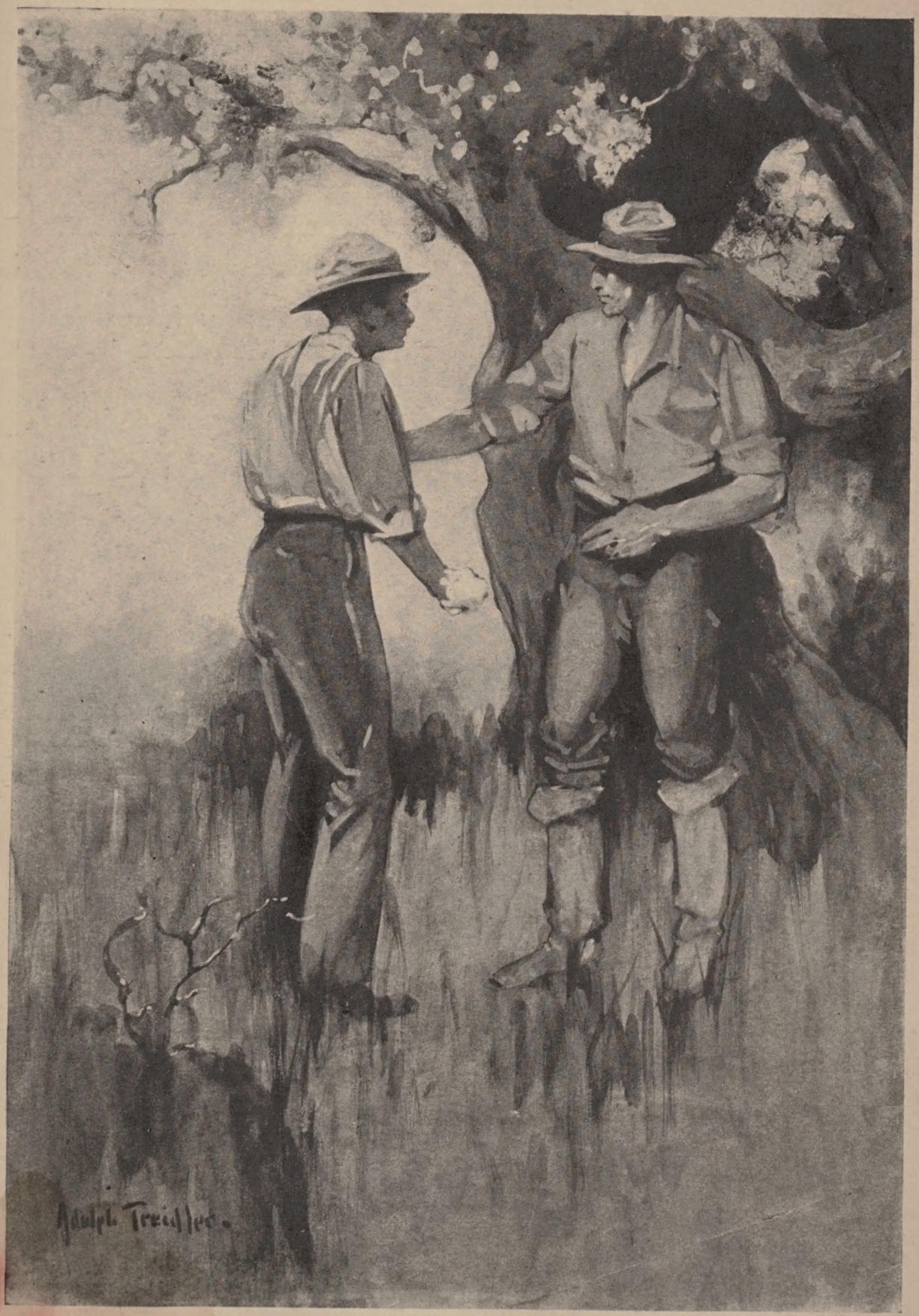
Ray glanced up in surprise at his big friend, and then, noticing the look of sad sternness on his face, walked along by his side without saying a word, wondering greatly why he should wish a private interview with him and what it was that had affected him so deeply.

Half a dozen rods from the camp a huge oak tree lifted its gnarled and knotted trunk close to the riverside, and here Tom Rawlins paused and asked Ray to be seated on a rock that jutted out above the ground at the base of the tree.

Ray at once sat down on the rock, and turned an uneasy and curious face to his companion, who stood with his back against the rough trunk of the tree.

"Ray," and there was the faintest suggestion of a tremor in Tom Rawlins's deep voice, "I have always found it best, when you've got anything to say, to say it in the fewest words possible, especially if it is something unpleasant, so I am not going to beat about the bush with you, but come to the point at once," and his face hardened. "What have you done with that gold watch and chain you took from me on board the *Queen of the Ohio* about the time I had that trouble with the gambler?" and he looked straight into Ray's startled eyes as if he would read every thought in the brain behind them.

For a full two minutes Ray stared back into his eyes, too astounded and horrified by the unexpectedness of the terrible charge to utter a word or to make a movement; and then, as the dreadful significance of Tom Rawlins's words began to sink more deeply into



"You—You Don't Mean to Accuse Me?"

his comprehension, his face flushed redly from neck to brow, and he jumped to his feet and stood tremblingly before Tom Rawlins.

"You—you don't mean to accuse me of—of stealing your watch and chain!" and his eyes began to flash indignantly.

"I do mean to accuse you of taking my watch and chain," and Tom Rawlins laid a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder. "But," and his face softened, "I'll not be hard with you, Ray. We've been through too much together. I'll not be hard with you, Ray. Tell me how you came to take the watch and chain, and what you have done with them, and I swear that no one but you and I shall ever know of this. Tell me, Ray," and the hand on the boy's shoulder trembled and his eyes looked longingly down on the young face.

"But I didn't take them! I never saw them! I don't know what you mean! How can you, how dare you, accuse me of doing such a dreadful thing?"

"Listen," and Tom Rawlins's face grew hard again, "you shall know how and why I dare accuse you. It is your right to know. Attached to the chain I wore a gold ring—a peculiar gold ring. There is but one other like it in the world. Ray, that ring hangs from a string around your neck! I saw it when dressing the wound made by the Digger Indian's arrow. Now will you tell me what you have done with the watch and chain?" and Tom Rawlins's grip tightened on Ray's shoulder.

"My father's ring! You accuse me of stealing my father's ring!" gasped the horrified boy. "Why, I have had that ring since I was a baby in the poorhouse! It was taken from my dead father's finger and given to me. Art knows all about it. He has seen it hundreds

of times. You can write to the poorhouse. They will tell you that I came honestly by it. I am not a thief," and the tears came into the agitated boy's eyes.

Tom Rawlins's hand had dropped from Ray's shoulder, and he was staring with startled eyes into the boy's face.

"Your father's ring! Your dead father's ring!" he repeated blankly. "Your father's ring! Tell me, who was your father?" and he gripped Ray by both his shoulders and held him rigidly, while his eyes searched his face.

"George Norman," Ray answered. "He was a circus athlete, and was killed while performing when I was five years old, and this ring," and Ray's hand went to his bosom and pulled out the ring, "was found on his finger and was left with me at the county poorhouse. Why do you say it is your ring, and that I stole it?"

"George Norman! George Norman Rawlins! George Norman, circus athlete! Ray, Ray, my boy! Ray, your father was my brother! Ray, I am your uncle! There can be no mistake. There were only two rings of the kind ever made, and George had one and I the other. Ray, forgive me," and the great arms caught up the astonished boy and held him close to his bosom, and then, still holding him in his arms, started with him for the camp, and when he reached the campfire he put Ray down on his feet and taking him by the hand, turned to the surprised group gathered around the fire.

"Let me introduce ourselves," he cried, his face glowing with happiness. "Good friends, my nephew, Ray Norman Rawlins," and he pushed Ray forward.

"Good friends, his father's brother, Thomas David Rawlins," and he bowed to his astounded friends.

What a time of congratulating and hand-shaking and questioning followed! Everybody was talking and laughing and trying to shake hands all at the same time, and every one had to examine the wonderful ring that had played such an important part in the affair again and again, and to hear its story repeated over and over.

The story, briefly told, was as follows:

George Norman Rawlins, Ray's father, had run away from home when but a lad to join a travelling circus that had caught his boyish fancy. When he grew up he became a star trapeze performer and all-around athlete, and as such travelled all over the world with various circuses. In India he bought the two curious rings, both exactly alike, and was assured by the jeweller that they were the only two of the kind that had ever been made. On his return to America he had visited his old home, and had given one of the rings to his younger and only brother, Thomas, who had greatly taken his fancy. Shortly after this he had married, and some six years later the old folks at home had received a letter asking them to take into their home and hearts his motherless little boy. They had written back at once for him to send the boy, but their letter was returned by the Dead Letter Office at Washington, and they had never heard from him again, nor were they able to learn what had become of either the father or the child. Tom Rawlins had always greatly prized the ring as a memento of his loved and lost brother, and had worn it attached to his watch chain in place of a charm, because the circlet was too small

to be passed over any one of his huge fingers. Some time, while on board the *Queen of the Ohio*, the ring, chain, watch, and all had been stolen from him, and he had believed Slim George, the gambler, to have taken them until he saw what he took to be his own ring hanging from a string around Ray's neck.

Such was the story of the ring and how Ray came to be accused of its theft.

"You don't know how good it seems to find that I really and truly do belong to somebody, that I have relatives, uncles, cousins, even a grandfather and grandmother, living the same as other boys," Ray said, after the excitement had quieted down. "And Uncle Tom and I are going back to the old home," his voice trembled a little as he spoke the word home—it was the first time he had ever spoken of a home of his own—"just as soon as we make our pile in the mines. Aren't we, uncle"—his voice hesitated just a little over the uncle—"Tom?"

"Yes, and mother and father will be very proud of such a splendid big grandson," and the big fellow's eyes rested affectionately on his nephew.

"And Art shall go with us," Ray continued, his eyes turning lovingly to where Arthur sat. "And—and if he can't find his own father and mother, he shall live with us. What splendid times we'll have!" and the boy's eyes glistened.

"But I am going to find my father and mother if they are living," Arthur declared. "I want to know that I belong to somebody, too," and there were tears in his eyes even while his lips smiled. "It makes me want to find my folks more than ever now to see what a splendid uncle you have discovered," and he glanced

at Big Tom Rawlins, who bowed and grinned. "Maybe there is something equally good in uncles waiting for me," and Arthur laughed to hide the ache in his heart, for he now felt more lonely and friendless than ever—no, not friendless, for no boy ever had better friends than he, and his eyes turned fondly to the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Judson and Mildred and Ray, and the sight of their loved forms brought him comfort and cheer.

Not until Mr. Judson called, "Sleep-time. Everybody stop talking and get to bed. To-morrow lands us in the Diggings, and we want to get an early start," did Ray stop plying his uncle with questions about his father and the old home, and it was long after he had stretched himself out in front of the fire before sleep came to quiet his excited mind and to take him to the land of dreams, where he was discovering fresh uncles and aunts and cousins and grandfathers and grandmothers all night long.

"Turn out! Roll out! Everybody going to the gold-diggings get up!" shouted Mr. Judson the next morning, an hour before the sun showed above the peaks of the Sierras.

There was no lingering in "bed." At the first shout all jumped to their feet, for at last the day had dawned that was to bring them to their journey's end—to the gold mines! The breakfast was hurriedly prepared and eaten, the few things they had left were quickly packed on one of the horses, and with jubilant hearts their last day's journey was begun.

They reached the top of the ridge about nine o'clock, but a thick forest of tall pine trees shut off a view of the valley below from their eager eyes.

"Oh, when—when will we see the gold mines?" Mildred implored impatiently of the two hunters, trying in vain to penetrate the thick woods with her eyes. "When will we see the gold mines?" and her glowing cheeks dimpled and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"In 'bout an hour, so be it we keeps a-goin'," Bill answered. "But they ain't much tew see. Jest a lot of dirty men scratchin' gravel like a lot of crazy hens, and gettin' that excited when they strikes a bit of yeller no bigger'n the end of your finger, that you'd think they'd knocked a hole through creation an' got a glimpse of heaven. Reckon they's all more or less lunaticky," and Bill shook his grizzled head as if such foolishness was beyond his comprehending.

At the end of the hour our little party passed suddenly out of the woods and on to a bare table of rocks that overlooked the narrow valley of a little river a hundred or more feet below them.

"That's th' American, an' them's th' gold-diggin's," and Bill pointed down the valley to where a scattered camp of tents and log houses and brush shacks and weather-beaten prairie-schooners stretched along both sides of the river. Roughly-dressed, uncouth-looking men were lounging about the camp. Others, scattered along the banks of the river, were shovelling gravel into long, narrow troughs through which water was running or wading about waist deep in the stream or standing in the edge of the river twirling large pans filled with dirt and water, their eyes intent on the swirling contents.

Their journey was ended. Below them lay the Land of Gold.

And here, for the present, with their eyes fixed on the Promised Land, the dangers and hardships of the long tramp across plains and over mountains and deserts all past, we will leave our friends, promising all who care to follow the further adventures of Ray and Arthur and their good friends, not forgetting Scoot, during their exciting quest for gold in the mines of California, that all these shall be recorded faithfully in the second book of the series, wherein the wild and romantic life of the California miners of '49–'50, the most dramatic and picturesque in the history of the world, will be pictured for the eyes of a generation who are reaping where their fathers sowed.

THE END

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